
天鏡のアルデラミン
Alderamin on the Sky
XII
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
XII
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
キャラクター原案 さんば挿
Illustration 竜徹
電撃文庫

Table of Contents

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「壁は信じるものでもなければ
縋るものでもない。
それは乗り越えるもの、
あるいは打ち破るものじゃ」
Alderamin on the Sky XIII
UNO BOKUTO PRESENTS
ILLUSTLATION:RYUTETSU
CHARACTER DESIGN:SOU SANBA


ねじ巻き精霊戦記
天鏡のアルデラミン
XII
宇野朴人
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キャラクター原案 さんば挿
Alderamin on the Sky
Uno Bokuto presents


「幾何学の公式はひと通り
把握しているんだろうね、ソローク元帥。
ここまで来て足を引っ張られるのは御免だよ」
「そういう少将閣下こそ、
三角形の面積の求め方ぐらいは
分かっていらっしゃるんだろうな。
この兄弟子から優しく教えてやってもいいんだぞ？」

ねじ巻き精靈戦記

天鏡のアルデラミン



Prologue

Multiple factions gathering in one place for a meeting. This might sound natural, but at times, this might not be feasible.

If all sides knew what the other parties were after, this might not be a bad choice. They just need to present their proposals and demands, accept the parts that were agreeable, and reject those they couldn't compromise on. They could then reevaluate their positions after all that was done. Regardless of the results, the relationship between the parties would progress in the appropriate direction.

The problem arose when the situation wasn’t like this— holding a meeting before figuring out the other party’s position and goals would often lead to tension and staying with the status quo. They didn’t know which card they should play, and what to hide or reveal to which party. The meeting would become a mere formality with each side probing each other.

「— Let’s stop here for now.」

Hence, Pope Jenancy Labutesuma declared immediately after meeting with the visitors. Since a break had already been scheduled, this decision was appropriate— The Three Nation Conference was going to be a drawn out battle in the first place, and no one was optimistic enough to think the meeting would get to the core issues with these veteran politicians involved.

But it was unexpected that she didn’t say anything aside from introducing herself— at least, that was what Ikuta and Chamille’s Katjvarna camp thought.

They were already aware that Kioka and Ra Saia Alderamin had a complete or partial alliance, and could be considered to be on the

same side. With that in mind, they should have plenty of chances to talk. Since there were just two factions, the boundaries were very simple.

「What, the meeting's over? I'm still not done yet though～」

However, there was a different possibility now. And it was caused by the arrival of this old man.

The 「Scientist」 Anarai Khan. Persecuted and forced to flee the Empire, the old sage searched for a place to further his research and ended up in Kioka. Up till then, there was no problem. As long as he stays in Kioka that values technology, he would be welcomed as a researcher.

But they were in Ra Saia Alderamin. Their fundamental belief that 「All the truth in the world stem from God」 was at odds with the position held by scientists. Furthermore, this was an important diplomatic meeting between the heads of states. Under such circumstances, what did Anarai Khan's appearance mean?

「......」

This was clearly a provocation. And a serious provocation that could cause serious fissures between the two nations… Just what was Ario Kyakushii scheming by doing this? Figuring this out was the other two countries' priority.

Chapter 1: Three Nation Conference

「... How should we evaluate this situation?」

In the diplomatic building where each of the three factions harboured their own schemes, Chamille asked Ikuta right after they entered their assigned break room and closed the door. The dark-haired youth sat on the bed and replied:

「Kioka probably has some issues with Ra Saia Alderamin. Bringing Professor Anarai here was their way of making a statement. Were they forced to accept some unfavourable conditions when they made their alliance…? Or they uncovered a serious betrayal from Ra Saia Alderamin?」

「If that is true, isn't this a good chance for us...?」

Chamille hesitantly said, and Ikuta was thinking the same thing— that the Prime Minister wouldn't show such an obvious opening in this meeting.

「Ra Saia Alderamin invaded the Grand Arfatra Mountains during the Northern Unrest without any declaration, and had betrayed the Katjvarna Empire diplomatically before. Considering the long relations between the two nations, this must be a difficult decision. They went that far in order to ally with Kioka, so it's hard to imagine them breaking this alliance… However...」

After concluding that, Ikuta considered the more fundamental parts.

「From Ra Saia Alderamin's perspective, there are many unstable factors. Kioka founded their nation by pushing forth technology and values Scientists. As they developed their nation, many old values of the Church of Aldera became outdated. Even if that wasn't true,

once they lose their common enemy, the weaker of the two nations will become an easy target for invasion.」

Recalling the face of the Pope he met for the first time just now, Ikuta delved deeper.

「At this juncture, another question comes out. Why did Ra Saia Alderamin betray the Empire in the first place?」

「... Hmm. This is a mystery to me too.」

「I won't say the relationship between the Empire and them is without issues. Thinking back, there was lots of friction too. However, when considering the survival of their nation, maintaining a diplomatic relationship will benefit both sides. Katjvarna can shore up the authority of the monarch through the Royal Sprite, and Ra Saia Alderamin can gain a lot of benefit from Katjvarna as the state religion. On top of that— although it might sound weird for me to say this, the Imperial citizens are more pious than the people of Kioka.」

Although the degree of piousness would gradually even out. Ikuta pointed out the reforms he was carrying out and continued analyzing.

「Sigh～ on the other hand, it's a fact that the Empire is slowly falling into its destruction. Pope Labutesuma has excellent eyes for strategy if she saw that… If that is so, I want to ask her about her thoughts on what the future after the war will be like. Unlike the Empire, Kioka doesn't need to strengthen their authority through the Church of Aldera. With an opponent that will not need her aid sooner or later, how will she build their relationship with them? — Diplomatic problems aside, I'm simply curious about this.」

The youth’s eyes were sparkling from his curiosity towards the Pope. Seeing him show a face she had not seen for quite some time, Chamille pouted unhappily:

「... I thought you hate religious people? You seem really happy to meet that Pope though.」

「Hmm? Well, she is a charming lady. What I hate isn’t religious people, but those with inflexible minds. That Pope doesn't seem to be such a person. She is open minded enough to take a joke, and is someone worth speaking to.」

「I think so too. You even wooed her by invoking the scriptures.」

When Chamille said that sternly, Ikuta said with a smile:

「— 『A short while later, he tripped over a stone and fell. He couldn’t brace his fall and his chest hit heavily onto the ground. With his slender legs that were just skin wrapped around bones, he didn’t think he could get up again.』」

「—?」

「『But his eyes that were level with the ground witnessed something amazing. A short distance away from him, there was a small flower rooted in a crack in the barren lands, blooming with the blue sky behind it. He was shocked, in awe that a flower was blooming in a place where there wasn’t even weed.』」

The youth stood up with his walking stick, and walked to the girl as he recited his lines.

「『The petals of that small wild flower were gold coloured, and immensely beautiful. On closer inspection, its leaves were wilted, and the stem was weak. He felt despair. A lone flower all by itself.

How much longer could it stay bloomed? The flower couldn't last long enough to bear seed.』」

「......」

「『When he realized that, a thought drove him into action. That place. I want to wait for my demise beside that flower. He decided in his heart.』」

Chamille realized what the youth was trying to say. She closed her eyes and imagined the scenery described by the youth.

「『Because his legs couldn't move, he crawled with his arms. The place he could reach by walking for a few short seconds was incredibly far away for him.

Even so, he still crawled over. This was his final and shortest journey. He set off in the afternoon and arrived right before dusk.

He had one final task left. He took great care to cover the flower with his body, careful not to break the fragile stem. He glanced at the flower and sighed in relief, then breathed his last.』」

The girl pictured a man holding a wild flower and laid in a corner of the wild— but Ikuta continued, the scene wasn't finished yet.

「『His body slowly rotted, nourishing the ground beneath him by a little. The wild flower on the verge of wilting absorbed nutrients from the ground and lasted a few more days. Seven days later, rain moistened the ground. The long drought was over. The wildflower absorbed the water and bore seed, and the seed then sprouted on the man's corpse.』」

Ikuta switched his walking stick to his left hand, and placed his right hand on the girl's cheek. Chamille who was looking down quivered a little.

「『The number of wildflower increased over generations, and before long, the place was filled with a gold coloured brilliance. The beautiful scenery made passing travelers forget the time as they stared. They named this place as the golden field, and spread word of it in their travels—』」

He stopped here. Chamille knew that the story was over and opened her eyes.

「...Saria Chronicles 16:8. This is an episode before the death of Saria the tormented.」

「Hmm. When I want to describe you by using flowers, this is the first story and comes to my mind — The wildflower blooming in the barren lands was so beautiful that it compelled a man on the verge of death to take action.」

Chamille's cheeks turned slightly hot. Sensing this from the tips of his fingers, the dark-haired youth smiled.

「I think the last thing Saria witnessed was the bright future hidden inside the blossoming flower… And so, you shouldn't stay frozen by time. If you freeze over again, I will melt that ice away.」

Ikuta looked right into her eyes and said to her. The youth added that interpreting the scriptures wasn't his job as if to hide his bashfulness. Chamille held her breath. His every move made her chest ache.

When she couldn't help reaching out for him, a quiet knock came.

「— What is it?」

Ikuta immediately checked. The tense voice of an admin officer came quickly.

「Yes! Pardon my intrusion, I have something to report!—Kioka's Prime Minister wishes to meet with the both of you!」

Chamille's face turned tense when she heard that. Ikuta grunted with a shrug.

「So he made the first move? — it seems that they have the initiative for now.」

Was he inviting them over to his territory, or coming over personally? The end results weren't too different, but at the national level, it had complicated implications.

It wasn't clear what the other party was scheming, and to be honest, Ikuta didn't want to choose either option. However, the other party already took that into consideration, and proposed a third option when he made the invitation.

「— This is a nice place.」

The two of them accepted the Prime Minister's suggestion and headed to a meeting area between their respective buildings. It was a square space cleared out from a corner of the corridor, and wasn't a secluded place for secret meetings. They could clearly see if anyone approaches.

「I'm relieved to hear that.」

Crackling came from the hearth near the space. The light of the flickering fire shone on Ario Kyakushii who was wearing a dark blue suit, and his three guards.

「This is a rare chance, so let me share some etiquette when meeting in such places.」

Ario said jokingly and walked to the wall.

「First, knock the wall of every places you visit for the first time.」

He knocked the wall with his fist. The sound echoed clearly in the quiet room.

「The trick is to not use too much strength. The wall breaking isn't a big deal, but it's not worth injuring your hand over this. If you find some spots where the sound is different, don't forget to greet loudly. For example, you can say:『Good work! What a tedious job!』」

The Prime Minister knocked all over the wall then returned to where he was and continued:

「However, there is no need to do so here. Because Jena knows what kind of person I am. I will be happy if you have the chance to use this lesson elsewhere.」

「Got it— but even if I want to compliment for their work, my hand can't reach the ceiling.」

Ikuta glanced at the tall ceiling above them. Ario shrugged with a nod:

「You are absolutely right. In the end, if you want to discuss more complicated things, you have to either move outdoors or communicate through paper. Whatever we discuss here will just be beating around the bush— it will probably bore you, Chamille.」

The Prime Minister suddenly turned his eyes to the Empress. She shook stiffly at his eyes that were filled with care and concern:

「... Your concerns are unnecessary. I'm not stupid enough to be bored in your presence.」

「I know, but you are a little too tense. This will be a long conference, and you won’t last long if you are always so nervous whenever you meet me, you know?」

Ario’s demeanour was completely at ease. Before he could control the flow of the entire conversation, Ikuta said:

「If you know the trick to acting so calm and collected, maybe you can share with us, Sir Kyakushii. Chamille and I have always been troubled by our lack of experience in socializing.」

「I will be honoured to, but I don’t think you need any guidance, Field Marshal Solork. Oh right— I heard you address her as Chamille just now, is that how you usually call her?」

「That’s right. She is family to me, so that’s only natural.」

Ikuta answered without any hesitation. The Prime Minister laughed out loud at that seemingly arrogant reply:

「Fufufufu...! If you intentionally adopt such an arrogant attitude, then what more do you need to learn from me? But let me give you some advice, I think you two are living too much in just the present. I hope it’s just my imagination.」

Ario said with a hint of concern, sat down in a chair nearby and waved them over.

「I will sit down first. It must be hard to stand with your injury. Please, take a seat.」

「Much obliged.」 「......」

Ikuta and Chamille nodded at each other. In situations like this, the first to sit would have less defenses, so the Prime Minister sitting

down first is part of the decorum. The youth and Chamille sat down shoulder to shoulder in their chairs.

「During the round of greetings earlier, I saw an interesting face amongst your envoy.」

After sitting down, Ikuta got right into the heart of the topic. Ario pretended to be retarded as usual and replied:

「You mean Jean? There's nothing to hide, I'm his adoptive father. I have always been proud of my son, and it fills me with joy to see him grow into a man who can participate in such diplomatic events. If you are interested in Jean, do use this chance to chat with him—」

「Unfortunately, I will only see that face in difficult situations. I'm not interested in seeing him, and he probably feels the same about me.」

Ikuta cut him off, stopping his prank. Ario clapped his hands with a smile.

「Hahaha, you are right. Since I didn't bring him with me, I will say it then. He has the same attitude as you whenever he mentions your name. You two are like two sides of a mirror.」

Ikuta had to spend a little— no, spent a lot of effort to not frown when he heard that. He couldn't tell if Ario was being sarcastic under his perfect politician's smile. He could feel once again that he was a difficult opponent.

Seeing the youth intentionally keeping his peace, the Prime Minister smiled wryly as if he couldn't keep it in any longer.

「Pardon me, I wasn't trying to pull a fast one— you want to ask about me bringing Professor Anarai Khan before Jena, right? Yes, I admit this going slightly overboard.」

「— If it's the me from five years ago, I will be rolling on the floor laughing out loud. However, my personality isn't so straight forward nowadays. I will cut right to the chase, why are you provoking an allied nation like this?」

Ikuta didn't mince his words and asked directly. The Prime Minister grunted, then overlapped his hands on his knees.

「Field Marshal Solork, a question for you. How do you think an alliance is maintained?」

「If you are speaking generally and not talking about exceptions— that's when both sides stand to gain from the alliance.」

「Correct. From that point of view, Kioka and Ra Saia Alderamin had an alliance at this point in time. When both of us are enemies against the Empire.」

They were talking about the same thing just now, Ikuta thought. He sensed the reason why Ario stopped there, and finished his words.

「... Hence, when the Empire falls, the benefits of the alliance will diminish. The further Kioka develops with an emphasis on technology, the more Ra Saia Alderamin's position will weaken with their inferior mindset and technology.」

The youth said firmly. Ario nodded with satisfaction.

「That's how it is. This means that from the long view, Ra Saia Alderamin has nothing to gain from this alliance.

Jena is smart, so she already knows this. But she still allied with my country and stuck with us this far. Why is that?」

Ikuta didn't hesitate to answer the question given to him.

「I can think of two possibilities. First, she wants to surpass Kioka in the future.」

「That will be sad if true, but it's plausible. But if that is so, then Ra Saia Alderamin's actions in recent years will look chaotic. If they are going to betray Kioka now, they shouldn't have betrayed the Empire in the first place.」

Ario immediately pointed out the flaw in his deduction. When the youth heard that, he stated the most plausible answer.

「... My second guess, is that she has a trump card that can maintain or turn the tables on the Kioka after the war with the Empire ends.」

Silence loomed over the venue. Only the crackling sound of firewood could be heard as the Prime Minister nodded quietly.

「I suspect as much. No, I'm certain of it. Ra Saia Alderamin is a theocracy, and has always conducted their affairs in strict secrecy. Having a trump card or two is still within Kioka's expectations.

However— it will be a different matter if the trump card involves Sprites.」

The mood turned heavy. *He is surprisingly easy to talk to* — Ikuta didn't expect this, and thought it would take a few days before they could discuss such a core topic.

With the youth and the Empress staring at him, Ario calmly delved deeper.

「Given all that, the question becomes even more basic— What exactly are Sprites?」

「——」

「I only thought about this recently. In the past, I was just like the masses, and Sprites were just something that obviously existed in this world. I have considered their utility, but never thought about the Sprites' origins… When that old man Scientist drifted into Kioka, my mindset changed.」

The Prime Minister's gaze towards the hearth suddenly shifted to Ikuta.

「Have you heard about the 『Artificial Sprite Theory』? No, you probably know more about it than I do.」

「... It's a theory that Sprites are man made objects. It's the base theory that leads to Professor Anarai's 『Super ancient civilization theory』.」

「That's right. When I first heard about it, I was impressed that someone thought about that. But as time passes, I can't ignore it anymore. On one hand, I'm not exactly a pious man, and can't really see the Sprites as a product of nature.」

Ikuta felt his thought process made sense. After all, this man was open minded enough to take in the drifting Scientist and put him in an important post. It wasn't a surprise that he didn't ignore Professor Anarai's theory.

「Light, water, wind, fire— Only Sprites will provide humans with these resources necessary for life without needing anything in return. All livestocks require food to grow; the crops can't be cultivated without water. This is only natural, but only Sprites provide us everything without needing anything in return. This fact is waved aside by saying 'this is the love of god', and thinking back now, it's terrifying how unnatural this is.」

Ikuta nodded gently. That's right— if you inspect all the things in the world, Sprites were an unnatural existence here.

「From that perspective, the abilities of the Sprite is a curious matter too. For example, Jewel Voice Broadcast— unfortunately, Kioka doesn't have such a thing, but this is an ability to propagate information to other humans. A shallow example that would be a newspaper.」

「......」

「Given the above facts, we can deduce that the Sprites are designed to have highly functional political intelligence. However, the Sprites themselves don't govern. Hence they didn't design themselves. Since it's not them nor us, then it's something wiser than both of us— if we don't use God as the reason and try to uncover the truth, then the super ancient civilization theory is a natural result of that line of thought.」

Ario paused briefly, then continued:

「But in the end, I'm just a politician. I'm not that interested in pursuing the true nature of the Sprites. What I can't ignore, is how uncovering the truth will affect the present situation.」

「... If the truth behind the Sprites matched Professor Anarai's theory, how do you think it will affect the current situation?」

Ikuta asked intriguely, and the Prime Minister answered smoothly:

「Assuming the Sprites are artificial and not made by God, then they are objects and not living creatures. Taking this one step further, it's a system deeply entwined with human society. We are the user, but the administrator is someone else.」

Administrator
, Ikuta muttered. Ario immediately added.

「With that assumption, I will state the most dangerous example I can think of— If all the Sprites in the world stops working one day, what do you think will happen?」

A familiar chill ran down Ikuta's spine… He imagined something similar in the past. He was in a completely different situation than now, and faced a different opponent. The youth stated the scene he thought about back then.

「... It will have a great impact on human society. The impact will differ by severity, but the population of the Empire and Kioka will diminish sharply in the next few decades, and civilization will regress by centuries.」

「I'm of the same mind. What if a being that can do that exist somewhere in this world?」

I can't ignore it.
Seeing the answer in Ikuta's eyes, Ario nodded.

「I suspect Ra Saia Alderamin's trump card is something of this sort. All sorts of signs so far fills me with doubt, and it's probably the same on your side too.」

Their standoff against the fox flashed through Ikuta and Chamille's mind. Stopping all the Sprites in the Empire— the trump card Trisnai Izanma used to protect himself is an obstacle they had to overcome sooner or later.

「I'm very concerned about that, and if this remains unsolved, then I can't put my mind at ease in a war. So— how about it? Don't you think it's a good chance to reveal everything, since all the actors have been gathered?」

Ario said, as if he had seen through Ikuta. Ikuta thought he was a formidable opponent, and urged him to continue: 「Go on.」

At the same time, the 「Insomniac Brilliant General」 was visiting Pope Jenancy Labutesuma's break room on the Prime Minister's orders.

「I'm Kioka Army Major General Jean Arkinex, here to see Pope Jena.」

The admin officer already informed the intent of his visit ahead of time, so his entry was smooth. Pope Jenancy sighed when she saw the visiting white-haired officer.

「... He knows it's hard for me to get mad at you, so he asked you to come, huh?」

「My apologies. I'm sorry for the earlier brazen actions by my adoptive father.」

Jean bowed and apologized forthrightly. He knew very well that his father chose him with that factor in mind. The Pope couldn't vent her anger at the youth before her, and sighed again.

「Ario can be a real pain sometimes… I get the gist of his goal. But why now? It makes sense if it's after the war, but the threat of the Empire still remains. Causing friction before them will create an opening which will be detrimental to both our sides.」

「Sir Kyakushii says that it is only at times like this can we combine the forces of both nations and pressure them.」

Jean didn't conceal anything. At this point, the Pope wasn't surprised by that anymore, and snorted.

「This means Ario is wooing those two from the Empire? … What a terrible man. I can still recall the frivolous words he used to compliment my beauty.」

She said in jest, but Jean didn't respond crudely with humour. Jean kept his head down, and the Pope said coldly:

「... Alright then. Since that is his intention, then I will deal with your two nations as he wished. However— tell that buffoon that there will be hell to pay for bringing that Heretic here.」

「Yes Mdm!」

Jean answered with his head still low. Caught between Ario Kyakushii and Jenancy Labutesuma, even he would feel nervous.

「— No wonder they brought old man Anarai here.」

After ending the meeting with the Prime Minister and returning to the break room, Ikuta and Chamille reviewed what they discussed.

「Kioka… Ario Kyakushii is serious about revealing Ra Saia Alderamin's secrets?」

「He has no choice now. Even if he claim that he was just kidding, he can't change the fact that he brought a Scientist before the Pope.」

The youth leaned his walking stick beside him and sat on the bed with a sigh:

「In other words, that discussion is an invitation for us to work together during the Conference— the problem is, we don't have any reason to refuse. The Empire and Kioka's interest are aligned in uncovering Ra Saia Alderamin's trump card.」

「Exerting diplomatic pressure with the combined might of two nations…? But the one who proposed this Three Nation Conference

is Pope Labutesuma. Is it really fine to not speak with her just because of our cooperation with Kioka?」

Chamille sat down gently beside Ikuta. Indeed— the chances were bleak, but she had not completely given up on reforging their alliance with Ra Saia Alderamin. Ikuta answered with the girl's feelings in mind:

「To accommodate for this, we will need to meet with the Pope in the next two days. I also need to find a chance to meet with Professor Anarai. It's a pain, but I'm willing to exchange intel with that white pretty boy… Things have really gotten complicated.」

He might be saying that, but Chamille didn't miss the faint smile on his lips. Anarai Khan's appearance had made him excited about this situation.

She wanted to ask further when knocking suddenly came from the door.

「Your Majesty, Yorga-san is back.」

「Let him in.」

Chamille answered Lucanti immediately, urging him in. The youth with a long face and monocle appeared.

「Pardon me— because of the efforts of the diplomatic team, the details of the negotiation are progressing smoothly. I will report again when our discussion reaches a good place, and let you make the final decision.」

Yorga immediately started his report. While Ikuta and Chamille were preparing for the next meeting, the team was also discussing territory and diplomatic issues with their counterparts from the other nations.

「I see. But this is your first diplomatic mission, is there anything confusing or troubling to you?」

「It’s not perfect, but at least no one is too timid and reserved. One reason is Vackie will start off the discussion, and the other admin officers are drawn in by her enthusiasm. And also...」

Yorga was hesitant to speak. But he then steeled himself and said:

「... In many situations, Chancellor Trisnai displayed outstanding capabilities. He used his vast experience and saw through the traps and goals laid out by the other nations, which impressed the diplomatic teams of Kioka and Ra Saia Alderamin.」

Hearing the fox's name in this unexpected place made Chamille furrowed her brows. Ikuta grunted and threw his head back onto the bed.

「... I thought as much. If he is given proper diplomatic work, he is an outstanding Chancellor .」

The youth wearing a monocle concurred with a nod. Ikuta turned his neck gently and gave his instructions.

「Continue tying him up with trivial busywork, don’t let him rest. Don’t let him have any time to think of any tricks. We have our hands full here, and can’t spare any time to deal with him.」

「Got it. Including surveillance, leave the rest to me. I will use all of my wits to overcome the issues safely.」

Yorga answered with an exaggeratingly respectful gesture before leaving/

He was a 「Disciple of Anarai」 and Ikuta's senior, but his pretentious demeanour remained unchanged. Ikuta turned to Chamille with an awkward smile.

「We don't have to worry about him for the time being, so let's focus on the issue on hand.」

「Hmm… But I'm surprised that Vackie is doing well on the diplomatic stage.」

「Just don't bring her along during talks with allies. In a sense, it's lucky we are dealing with two enemy nations this time, so we don't have to follow complicated protocols to appease them. If we have to take off our masks and strive single mindedly for our national benefits, she is the best person for the job.」

Ikuta said, as if he was seeing that very scene— of her bold and fearless junior disciple using this chance to make speeches and driving the other nation's diplomats into a helpless corner. This arrangement will also stop Trisnai from seizing control of the diplomatic mission.

「However, our debate won't be so simple. How should we set the stage with this chance we have—?」

After spending tens of minutes deciding the general direction, Ikuta and Chamille left the room. The Empress was nervously thinking about the person they were going to meet, and was surprised when the youth exited the building.

「S-Solork, we are going to meet Professor Anarai, so why did you go outside?」

「It's the opposite, Chamille. There's no way that old man will stay docilely inside the building.」

Ikuta walked in front to shield the girl from the cold breeze, and wandered outside the diplomatic building. A few minutes later, he found a large tent set up beside the building.

「See, as expected, he set up a base here— I'm Ikuta Solork! Is old man Anarai, Bajin-nii or Nazuna-nee in there～!」

There are Kioka officers who appear to be guards around the tent, but Ikuta ignored them and called out to the Scientists. The soldiers were taken aback and rushed to his side.

「P-Please don't make things difficult, Field Marshal Sir. If you wish to meet them, please inform us ahead of time—」

「Hahaha, I don't want to jump through those hoops. I'm just a disciple visiting his teacher.」

The youth knew he was being unreasonable, and went all in. As the officers were troubled by his shameless act, an old man in a white coat pulled the tent door aside.

「Ohh, you came, Ikuta! I was just thinking about going over to find you! It must be cold outside, come on in!」

「P-Professor Anarai? This will be a problem for us, we will need to get permission from the Prime Minister before this meeting...!」

The old sage brushed aside the soldiers and walked right up to the two visitors. From his actions, it seems this visit was within Ario Kyakushii's expectations, Ikuta deduced. The Prime Minister already made arrangements for his men to spy on the private meeting in his absence— the youth thought as he walked towards Anarai who was waving him over.

「Thanks for having me～ Chamille, come here.」

「Ermm, yes...」

Chamille wasn't thick skinned like Ikuta, and followed a little sheepishly. There was a ventilation hole at the top of the tent, and a hearth burning in the middle kept it warm. More than ten Scientist welcomed the two of them with a smile.

「Oh, long time no see! I already heard, you became a Field Marshal before I knew it! What's with that lofty cape, it doesn't suit you at all! You should wear a white coat instead of that!」

Anarai patted Ikuta's shoulder excitedly. His assistant Bajin came over with two cups of tea and said apologetically:

「Sorry Ikuta, you must be surprised by how sudden this is. If possible, we want to notify you in advance, but it's impossible with our patron Sir Kyakushii watching...」

Ikuta nodded with a smile as his senior disciple explained all that, and sipped his tea with practiced movements. Chamille opened her eyes wide in surprise— Ikuta never ate any food aside from those prepared by Imperial personnel, but he had let his guard down here.

This is his nest

. Chamille thought as she watched him. This was the place he loved, the place where the white coat intellects were gathered.

「I understand, Bajin-nii. If you offended the Prime Minister and got barred from coming here, it would be a huge loss. I'm impressed that you all came here. Thanks to you, this tedious Conference is going to get more interesting.」

Ikuta said sincerely. At this moment, a woman walked over. She was a Scientist who was as close to Ikuta as Bajin, Nazuna.

「... It's been a while, Ikuta.」

「Nazuna-nee, long time no see. It must be hard taking care of the Professor and Bajin-nii.」

「They are the same as always… I heard about it, you hurt your leg. 」

Nazuna said with her eyes on his left leg and walking stick. She bit her lips and looked right at Ikuta.

「I won't ask, since it's too late to do anything about it… B-But, I have to say this.」

She wrapped her arms around the youth's back and held him tightly… She thought about how useless she had been, and recalled the face of the vermillion-haired girl who was still a child in her mind. Nazuna trembled from the many emotions that welled up in her chest, and said quietly.

「— I'm sorry that I wasn't of any help. You must have had a hard time...!」

Tears fell onto his shoulder. Ikuta felt the concern from his senior disciple, and hugged her back gently with a calm smile.

「... Thank you, Nazuna-nee. But… I'm fine. I'm really fine now.」

Ikuta was relieved that his reply didn't sound like he was crying. He let go of his embrace and took a step back towards Chamille… Before he lost control of his emotions to nostalgia, he had to speed up the pace of the conversation.

「It's a bit late, but let me introduce you. She is Chamille— the girl that Yatori and I cherish the most. She has a stubborn side, but she is gentle and smart. Please get along with her.」

「Huh, ahh—」

The youth skipped her status as the Empress and her history during his introduction, which made Chamille dumbstruck. She was unsure how to respond and looked confused, and Nazuna wiped her tears away with a smile.

「— Nice to meet you, Chamille-chan. I'm Nazuna, Ikuta's senior disciple.」

「I'm Bajin, Ikuta's senior disciple. Pleased to meet you, Chamille-chan.」

The two Scientists offered their hands. She was not used to being addressed that way, but Chamille still shook their hands and the two of them continued:

「Oh, are you hungry? Wait here, I will get some snacks.」

「Right, when we were researching bread on the country's behest, we got into baking snacks, and reached the level of retail shops before we knew it. Try one if you don't mind.」

Nazuna offered the girl some baked confectioneries that had been cut. Chamille was at a loss, but when Ikuta smiled at her with a nod, she timidly put the snack into her mouth. The moist and tender texture spread in her mouth and melted. The unexpected deliciousness made the girl open her eyes wide.

Overlapping her reaction with the vermillion-haired girl when he first met her, Ikuta said:

「We hired Malvackie and Yorga, and both of them are performing great at their jobs. You guys are highly valued over there too. Before we knew it, our Scientists have made it in the Empire and Kioka. I never thought this would happen when the church is chasing after the Scientists.」

「So this time, we are taking the initiative and going to them. Did you see the Pope's face!? That's so hilarious!」

Anarai showed a mischievous face and Ikuta nodded with an awkward smile.

「I wanted to laugh out loud but restrained myself. It will be bad to piss off the opponent too much on the first day. You should reflect on yourself too.」

Ikuta said jokingly and then paused. He looked at all the Scientists gathered here:

「Alright, since this will be a long fight, so we can catch up with each other later. I just want to confirm— the goal of everyone here is to uncover the 『truth behind the Sprites』 that Ra Saia Alderamin has kept a secret all this time, correct?」

The Scientists nodded as if it was obvious. Anarai added with a big smile.

「It's not too different from checking my answers～ to test the hypothesis of my 『Super Ancient Civilization theory』.」

「How far are you going to go? You are as stubborn as ever, old man.」

Ikuta was happy to see his teacher's curiosity had not changed at all since his childhood.

「It's a shame that I can't join you, but I won't get in your way either— so give it your best shot. Given everyone's personality, you must have prepared the information that will shake the very foundation of Ra Saia Alderamin, right?」

All the Scientists showed a firm smile. They probably would cause some havoc. Ikuta noticed that, and was looking forward to it.

About an hour after reluctantly leaving the nest, Ikuta and Chamille visited Pope Labutesuma as scheduled.

「From how the situation had developed so far, what kind of attitude do you wish us to take, Pope?」

After their greetings, this was the first thing Ikuta asked her. The Pope answered immediately.

「I hope you will take my side and chide Ario Kyakushii of course, and tell him not to do anything that will invite divine punishment.」

She said with the expression of a teacher troubled by problematic children. The youth crossed his arms when he heard that.

「It's hard to make a decision here. Be it punishing Kioka, or the relationship between your country and Kioka deteriorating, both will benefit us.」

「You got it wrong, that doesn't sound like a hard decision at all… But you won't miss out on this opportunity, right? This is a godsend for you.」

The Pope sighed. Ikuta observed her expression and continued:

「This might sound like an excuse— but compared to your country's relationship with Kioka worsening, I'm more interested in your plans. We want to know what your country wants and hates. After all, we were betrayed once before.」

The last part was dripping with sarcasm. After a brief silence, the Pope cast her gaze down sadly.

「... That’s right, you fought at the frontlines back then, so it’s only natural for you to bear a grudge. However...」

Her words stirred his memories, and he could feel the cold dry air of the Grand Arfatra Mountains on his skin again. He remembered the faces of the people who died… His platoon mates Corporal Ninika and Sergeant Cecidi. Warrant Officer Deinkun who saved his life twice. And Private First Class Kanna Temari, a fellow believer of Science whom he considered his junior disciple—

「... That’s right. It’s tough when more enemies show up after the fighting seems to be over. I really wished your country can at least declare war first.」

Ikuta suppressed his emotions and protested in the minimal fashion in a restrained tone. His actions that were proper for this diplomatic stage made the Pope show a pained expression.

「...Ikuta Solork. It’s impressive that you can act so composed in front of Ario and me.」

「...? Pardon me, but what do you mean by that?」

「I’m saying that you can be more angry. You are a person whose life has been messed up because of the will of the nation… It’s too harsh for someone your age to suppress all these feelings and handle diplomatic matters, and it pains me to see you like this.」

Pope said with her downcast eyes. Not expecting her to say that, Ikuta had no words. He then said what he was really thinking about.

「I have things more important than grudges in my mind. It has always been with me. That’s all.」

His tone was very calm. Chamille couldn’t stand listening quietly anymore and said after taking a deep breath.

「... I'm not as good with words as Solork, but diplomacy should be my responsibility. I have a question, Pope Labutesuma.」

「Yes, please ask away, Empress Chamille.」

The Pope turned her gaze towards the Empress. Despite the pressure, the girl straightened her back defiantly and said:

「The previous Emperor who was no more than a puppet had passed, and I have purged the parasitic bureaucrats leeching off the Empire. And I swear to take the head of the fox who survived sooner or later. The Empire you had forsaken and the one that we are running are...」

「......」

「I won't say anymore. But if you wish to talk, I will be ready.」

She declared that she was open to discussion, and took a strong stance, hinting that the other party should be the one apologizing. In anyone's eyes, her demeanour was befitting of a monarch. The Pope acknowledged that and closed her eyes.

「... Empress Chamille, your character exceeded my expectations. No, you have more than exceeded that. Based on my predictions from a decade ago, the Empire's government should be in shambles, or at best, be under military junta.」

The Empress had to admit that was a reasonable take. Chamille— no, not just her, no one could have predicted the current situation.

「The royal family rotten to the core gives rise to a rare wise Empress in its moment of greatest danger… No, it's because of this situation that a wise Empress appeared? With all my years, I still can't fathom history.」

The Pope muttered before gently opening her eyes. She looked right at Chamille and declared:

「But it’s too late to turn back the hands of time— Ra Saia Alderamin is not seeking to reforge an alliance with the Empire.」

「—!」

The impact pierced the Empress’ heart. This wasn’t an unexpected answer, and the probability of that answer was over fifty percent in her mind. But it wasn’t easy for her that her prediction turned true. *We have to continue hostilities against both nations at the same time* — when that idea was about to be set, Ikuta placed a hand gently on her shoulder.

「Calm down, Chamille… there’s an error with the way you put things, Pope Labutesuma. It’s not that you are not seeking to renew your alliance with the Empire, but that you can’t.」

THe Pope remained silent. Ikuta continued explaining.

「If you betray Kioka and ally with the Empire, Kioka will invade Ra Saia Alderamin immediately after the Three Nation Conference is concluded. Your defences can’t intercept the invaders alone, and will require the Empire to swiftly send aid… And to be frank, the Empire can’t spare the troops right now.」

Ikuta said before stopping there and stared at her. After a long silence, the Pope nodded:

「This is one reason, but in a stricter sense, we can’t ignore the fact that the Empire’s resurgence is just temporary… As both of you know, we have betrayed the alliance with the Empire before, so it will be difficult to change tracks now.」

Chamille couldn't think about what to say and grit his teeth. Pope looked at her approvingly, then said with a softer tone.

「Are you disappointed? But there's something I have to say— Ra Saia Alderamin wished happiness for the Imperial citizens and Kioka citizens equally. Be it the past, present or future, this won't ever change.」

What she said sounded nice but hollow. At best, it was just niceties from a theocratic nation. Ikuta didn't hesitate to attack the opening she showed him.

「... What about your country ordaining Trisnai Izanma as an Archbishop?」

The Pope's smile turned cold. Her face became that of a ruler and answered:

「— Assuming there's a house on the verge of collapse because of termites, and we are kept at bay by guard dogs, and the house is beyond repair. In that case… Feeding the termites is also a way to solve this problem.」

「You are not going to put on a facade? It might make strategic sense, but this will harm the integrity of the Church of Aldera.」

「Speaking of integrity, the Church of Aldera has no standing in the Empire anymore. Empress Chamille— there are many high ranking priests amongst the people you executed.」

Chamille who was named frowned. It was as the Pope said, she had executed countless priests who colluded with the corrupted nobles. She already expected the Pope to bring this up, but the Pope had more to say.

「On one hand, because of their collusion with the nobles, the quality of the branch Church in the Empire has been falling. There aren't many who can stay pure in an environment with rampant corruption… There's nothing to lose from giving that fox a meaningless title. This is just a different way of cutting off ties with him.」

Pope was cold when she told them this scheme, and the Empress listened with bated breath. She cut off her comrades mercilessly if the situation calls for it. The Pope has the necessary quality of a ruler.

「... Are you planning to strip Trisnai Izanma of his Archbishop title?」

「Unfortunately, we don't plan to do so yet. He is a tool and insurance that I picked to use against the Empire that has a more powerful military than us. My expectation of him when I first installed him was different, but he still has his uses. I can't remove him easily, especially with the relationship between Kioka and us being rocky.」

The Pope confessed. *I should treat her in the same cold way*, Chamille realized painfully— However, she couldn't keep the bitterness out of her words.

「I see, that's your plan. However— I will never forget the important things I lost because I couldn't eliminate the fox during a crucial moment.」

This was the only thing where she couldn't hide her emotions like Ikuta and speak about. Even the Pope opposite her had the same look of regret:

「... That is my mistake. As I mentioned, I didn't expect the revival of the Empire during the past few years. If I knew about your ability and that you would take the throne, there is a chance I would have chosen a different method… Are you hoping for an apology?」

She made it clear that she would apologize if the Empress wished for it. Chamille noticed the Pope's intention, however, she just shook her head with a blank face.

「No, I don't need an apology… After hearing that, I'm certain this is because of my own incompetence.」

She thought as she answered— if she took the throne earlier and became a wise ruler before the coup, then this wouldn't have happened. Ikuta spoke with a firm tone to refute her self reproaching logic:

「That's not right, Chamille, your logic is obviously flawed. This is applicable to plenty of other people. The people older than you, and more involved with the future of the nation at that time. And I'm one of them too— it's clear to everyone that they are more guilty than you.」

Ikuta looked right into the girl's eyes when he said that, then turned to the Pope who looked surprised.

「... Pardon me for interrupting. However, I will do the same if this child blames herself with a strange standard again, even in a meeting that decides the fate of a nation. That is the top priority for me.」

Ikuta declared unreservedly that he would place the girl's wellbeing above all else. This made Chamille blush. The Pope looked at the two of them and smiled.

「... It's fine. The teachings of the Church of Aldera also preach timely intervention… How nostalgic. In the past, I often teach the children in the Cathedral too.」

The Pope looked at the sky outside the window, then turned back to the two of them and said:

「I learned one thing. Not just protecting, adoring or doting— You are raising Princess Chamille, right, Field Marshal Solork.」

The next day, 10am in the morning the Pope who had made her resolve, and the Scientist finally started their battle.

「... What's all this things you brought in, what are you trying to do, 『Heretic』 Anarai Khan?」

Jenancy Labutesuma chided sternly in a tone she never used before. The venue was the same meeting hall where they first met, but there were far fewer attendees. From the Empire, there were Ikuta and Chamille, while Kioka had Ario, Jean and Anarai's group. Ra Saia Alderamin was represented by the Pope herself and General Akgarpa— a little over ten people. The diplomats from the three nations were gathered in a room nearby to discuss other matters.

「I'm here to pick a quarrel with god. Just like that name you call me by.」

The reason for this arrangement was because of this old sage. From the perspective of the Church of Aldera, letting the Heretic stand by the feet of their God and speaking with the Pope directly was intolerable.

「... I see. You lot are getting cocky because you have the backing of Kioka, and is using the Three Nation Conference as a chance to vent at me, right?」

「I won't lie that taking revenge is part of my intentions, but I can't waste all my time on such trivial things. We are here for Science!」

After finishing up their pointless banter, Anarai asked the first question:

「Instead of that, I want to ask you something. Hey— Pope Jenancy Labutesuma. Why do you all hate Science?」

「I don't see the point in explaining.」

「There is a point… None of my disciples know, but I still remember the start of this dispute. When the inquisition knocked on the door of my laboratory.」

With his hands on the round table, the old sage reminiscence the past and continued:

「That's when I was just 35 or 36. I have far fewer disciples, and lived as a researcher in a corner of the Imperial Western territories. I didn't have a patron back then, and made a living by teaching the residents maths and writing.」

「......」

「At that time, I had a good relationship with the local priests, and even made a few tea buddies. If I can continue my research in peace, then my life would have panned out differently. However… It wasn't meant to be. The priest sent by the main church submitted a report that branded me a heretic.」

Anarai clenched his fist to show his anger from decades ago.

「To be honest, I don't really get it. We are not a religious group, so what's all that about heretics? Back then, I was just a teacher

educating the masses with knowledge, and didn't touch on Alderamin theology or ethics. I didn't want to find any trouble.

If you say that the pursuit of Science defied the Church of Aldera, then fine. But I only operated a small school back then. Even if the group's ideology differed from your beliefs, skipping the trials and branding me as a heretic is an over reaction.」

「......」

「And the Church of Aldera didn't have such a stern stance towards heretics in the past. It's clear from their implicit consent of the Shinnack Tribe's belief in Sprites. The records of past inquisition trials can be used as reference too. The Ganon-Dio sect that peddles doomsday theories, and the militant Thekuniya sect that attempted to overthrow the nation— these two are model heretics, and unofficial religions with over tens of thousands of followers. The other cases aren't too different. Considering this history— the Church of Aldera consider these groups that are a threat to their nation, and dispose of them.」

Anarai explained the abnormality of his group's treatment, and added.

「And being branded a 『Heretic』— It's a unique title throughout history, an adverse branding that only I possess. In other words… it's a curse that makes it impossible for me to contract a Sprite.」

Ikuta nodded. That's right— this is the divine punishment given to Heretics. No Sprites will form a contract with Anarai Khan or provide him with aid directly. This sounded like something out of the bible, but it's the truth.

「This unique treatment of us is one of the mysteries I want to solve… And it's probably related to the other mysteries. What say you, Pope?」

The old sage glared at her. The Pope calmly shook her head.

「The reason is obvious— Your group's existence defies the will of god. Everything is as preordained in the scriptures.」

「I see, the will of god, huh? Then who is god?」

Anarai asked immediately. There was a dangerous hint in his voice, which made the Pope furrowed her brows.

「Your answer is as good as an implicit agreement. You think your half baked concealment will work, Pope? What I want to know is the facts not recorded on the scriptures— No, it's the truth hidden by the bible!」

When Anarai said that, all the Scientists behind him stood up. Seeing them preparing their documents and ready for a grand debate, the Pope cast an unhappy gaze towards a member of the audience.

「... Are you insisting that I do something so tedious, Ario?」

At her question, the Prime Minister shrugged.

「This is your decision, Jena. To be honest, I want to listen to your voice. The longer, the better.」

In the face of his unreasonable attitude, Pope glared at Ario. However, her stare was cut off by her nemesis before her.

「Next will be the main agenda. First— I'm certain that Sprites are artificially made.」

When Anarai finally spoke about this, the intrigued Ikuta and Chamille leaned forward. The Pope snorted and didn't seem surprised.

「... Right, I heard you all have such blasphemic delusions. We even found traces of attempts to create Sprites in the laboratories you abandoned. Everything you did is unforgivable, but let me ask you anyway— did your research bear fruit?」

The Pope asked coldly, and Anarai shook his head.

「If you're asking if we succeeded in creating a Sprite, then regrettably, no. The standard of our technology is too low to create such a thing. The mechanism to create fire, water, wind and light— we formulated vague hypothesis, but aren't able to fully analyze any of them.」

「It's impossible for the shallow knowledge of men to replicate the work of God.」

「You are jumping to conclusions, Pope. We can't create Sprites by ourselves, but we found countless clues during our attempts.

As for the reason we think Sprites are artificial— first, all Sprites are all made in the same size. From it's height to every other measurement, they are all similar down to a centimetre. Do you understand how abnormal this is?」

「I don't. The work of god is beyond the wisdom of men. That is all.
」

「No, it's the opposite— your Church of Aldera claims that everything in this world, even a blade of grass, is created by god. Hence, the Sprites should have the features of a creation of god, like everything else. God didn't set a standard size when creating us. As

you know, no two pebbles you pick up at the river banks are the same.」

Bajin and Nazuna who were standing behind the old sage carried a large black stone board in. After they placed the stone board covered with drawings and illustrations on the round table, Anarai continued:

「In contrast, there are things that have the exact specification in this word, which is casting. By injecting materials into the same mould, there are no variations in the product, unlike things made in nature.

The technology of casting started more than a thousand years ago. And before that, the technology used is forging— deforming metals by hammering them, slowly bending them into shape. This is tedious and the end product is largely dependent on the skills of the craftsman. Just like the grand scheme of god, there are pretty and ugly humans, right?」

「No, appearance doesn't matter before god, and there is a reason behind everything. The grand scheme of god cannot be compared to the crude craftsmanship of men.」

「Reason? That should be something we uncover in the end, and not something bestowed from the beginning. Nevermind, back on topic— to overcome the tediousness and variation of forging, we just need to make a good mould, then anyone can inject material into the mould and create the same product. So with the supply of materials, it is possible for 『mass production』. The production becomes efficient with standard quality— Every nation is striving towards this goal, and is an indispensable factor driving the development of human civilization.」

Anarai stopped here, and knocked on the black stone board.

「You should understand now. Casting, uniformity— these are artificial technology for human survival, and aren't a design that surpass human wisdom. It represents the lives of humans, which is in stark contrast with the free form nature of god.」

「......」

「With the above reasons, we think there is a human hand in the design of Sprites. Specifically speaking, when comparing humans and Sprites, the former is a product of nature, and the later is artificial. What do you think, Pope?」

Having said his piece, Anarai gave the other party the chance to speak. The Pope shook her head with a sigh.

「... This isn't even a point of contention. Since this is a human technology, then God who created men possesses it from the beginning. God used a different method to create Sprites. What's so confusing about that?」

「Let me ask you then— God didn't set a uniform standard when creating us, but did so for Sprites. What's the point of that?」

「I can't completely decipher the will of God. We only trust in the Almighty's will.」

The Pope refused to answer further questions. When Anarai heard that, his shoulders shuddered.

「... That again, huh. God is inviolable, so we can't question his intentions— It's a cliche line, but it makes me angry every time I hear it. Of all the sophistry in this world, this is the most shameless one.」

The rage in his voice intensified, and spilled forth from the Scientist's maw.

「How long are you going to keep god silent!? When the omnipotent god only answers in silence, don’t you realize that this situation is seriously damaging the reputation of god!? A god that can’t answer is no longer god! It’s just an archaic wall that blocks the thinking of mankind!」

The cry of the man who battled with god for over half a century echoed in the hall. The audience listened with bated breath as the old sage said with a deep voice.

「The walls aren't meant to be relied on. It’s something to overcome or destroy. And so— we did just that.」

Anarai signaled with his gaze, and the Scientists brought in a bag that was big enough to hold three adults. After laying it on the round table and peeling off the layers of cloth, it unveils some shimmering objects. They had uneven shapes, and looked like shards broken off a larger object.

「What do you think this is, Pope?」

「... I don’t know. Looks like some debris, I don’t recall seeing anything like it.」

The Pope answered honestly. Anarai snorted:

「Of course you didn’t. It will be a problem if you did— This is the debris from the other wall of the Cathedral.」

His words froze the hall. Chamille stared at the debris and muttered with a tremble:

「Did you— smashed it?」

The old sage claimed to have shattered the outer wall of the Cathedral, which had never been done in all recorded history. The

Pope appeared unfazed, but Ikuta could tell she was shaken. A long while later, she squeezed out these words:

「... Nonsense.」

「If you think so, touch it. You will find it is obviously different from any other materials in existence. You can try smashing it with a hammer too. After seeing how it remains unmoved after getting smashed, you will have to accept reality.」

「......!」

「We have only smashed a small corner of the wall for now, but in the near future, we will reach further inside the wall. I have a hunch what we will find inside.」

Anarai closed his eyes as if to imagine the scene, and said with a clear voice:

「The factory that manufactures the Four Great Sprites. It uses a technology and design far more advanced than ours to create a production line— but one day, we will catch up to the technology of the super ancient civilization!」

He cried with eyes wide open. General Akgarpa who had been watching from the side couldn't stand the Heretic anymore and roared:

「Insolent fools! Just how far are you going to blaspheme god!?」

「Do you even need to ask!? Until your church stop forcibly controlling the minds of mankind!」

Anarai countered without backing down, his firm determination burning in his eyes.

The intense debate lasted more than an hour, and Ikuta suggested a break after seeing both sides need one, so the discussion ended for the day.

「...Professor Anarai is really intense.」

「Yes. I have known him for a long time, but this is the first time I saw him going that far.」

While waiting for Anarai in the corridor outside the hall, Ikuta and Chamille shared their views. They were surprised that the Scientist brought up the shards from the Cathedral's walls, but the Empress crossed her arms with a doubtful face.

「However, is there any meaning in his questions? No matter how much he pressed the Pope, she just needed to hold her peace. I think his questions are only meaningful if the other party has the intention to answer.」

She thought as she thought back to how the Pope remained silent. Ikuta agreed with her partially, then added.

「That's true, I don't know whether the Pope can answer… But more importantly, old man Anarai must be trying to persuade them.」

「Persuade? You mean the Pope?」

「Of course it's the Pope. And also— a certain person behind her.」

Ikuta looked up at the sky beyond the ceiling. A chill went down Chamille's spine— what was the old sage seeing? Just 「what」 is he trying to persuade?



「— Phew! My throat is dry after talking nonstop!」

At this moment— speak of the devil, the subject himself exited the conference hall. Ikuta's eyes lit up and he walked to his teacher.

「「Thank you for your hard work, Professor Anarai.」」

Two identical greetings came out at the same time. The other greeting came from the white-haired officer standing on the other side of the old sage.

「... Hmm?」「... Hmmmm?」

They locked eyes with hostility on their faces. Professor Anarai who was caught in between said loudly in a gleeful tone.

「Oh, Ikuta and Jean! What do you think about our debate, it's worth a listen, right!?」

「Speaking reservedly, the contents are very stimulating… That aside, hey, white pretty boy, what are you doing here? Go back to the Prime Minister!」

「That's my line, Ikuta Solork. Professor Anarai is a member of our camp. I'm the one confused by your presence here.」

The two of them pushed each other with hostile words. Anarai was surprised by their interaction.

「What, you two are already acquainted? That saves me the trouble of introducing your new comrades.」

「「... New comrades!?」」

They yelled identical words once again. The old sage nodded with a smile.

「Hahaha— That's right, you are both my disciples. You might hail from different nations, but you are both comrades in the pursuit of Science!」

Anarai said as he patted their backs. After standing blankly on the spot, they recovered at the same time.

「... I understand now. You took in this guy as a disciple, I see.」

「Professor! Why did you keep me in the dark all this while...!?」

「? No, I'm not hiding it. I already mentioned that I have a bunch of interesting disciples in the Empire, right? I didn't tell you all of their names though.」

This haphazard explanation made Jean hold his head. Watching his reaction, Ikuta realized something and curled his lips maliciously.

「... It can't be helped, but whatever, that's not important.」

The dark-haired youth said as he stood beside the white-haired officer, patting the puzzled man's shoulder. Ikuta said with a brilliant smile.

「Anyway, there is only one important thing from what we know— you are my junior disciple, white pretty boy.」

「*Hazgaze【Are you kidding me】!?」

Jean shouted in Bayoshie on reflex. His ears were ringing from the sudden shout, but Ikuta looked gleeful.

「Hmm～? Hey, is that the attitude you show to your senior disciple ～?」

「There's no way I harbour even a shred of respect towards you!」

「Even so, you still have to — Woaah?」

Ikuta was about to taunt him further when Jean rushed over and kicked his walking stick. Ikuta almost fell down, but steady himself through his sheer guts. His brows were breaking out in cold sweat as he yelled:

「...! Why you! You kicked my walking stick? This is definitely a diplomatic crisis!」

「Oh, my bad, I will kick your face next time! It's hard to aim, so bend over!」

The two of them quarrelled with each other, any thoughts of self restraint were gone from their minds. The verbal quarrel turned into a scuffle, and their guards interfered in a hurry.

「J-Jean? Calm down! This is the Conference venue!」

「Lord Solork! Pardon me for saying so, but it's unwise to get into a conflict here!」

Miara and Lucanti held them back as Ikuta and Jean continued throwing insults at each other. At the same time, the diplomatic priests rushed over when they heard the uproar.

「W-What happened? What's going on—?」

「... Unprecedented. This is unprecedented, Solork.」

「... Sorry.」

About ten minutes later, Ikuta who was forcibly brought back to the break room was sitting in seiza on the bed while Chamille chided him.

「The Field Marshal that heads the military got into a scuffle with an enemy nation's Major General during the Three Nation Conference… You got into a fight over such a retarded reason, so retarded that I forgot to intervene. But fortunately, the other party probably won't make a big deal over this matter, since it's such a low class scuffle... 」

The girl said, and her shoulders felt weak just thinking about it. Before her, Ikuta crossed his arms and grunted.

「... I'm surprised myself too. I got the material to mock that guy now. When that idea flashed across my mind, I just had speak my mind...」

「Just how much do you dislike Major General Jean Arkinex? I know you two have a long history, but that was too far.」

「Yes, you are right… If only his face is uglier… Ahh~ damn it, I don't want to see that handsome face again.」

The youth laid face down on the bed depressedly. Seeing that, Chamille pouted unhappily.

「... Ever since I met you, you will curse out handsome men whenever you have the chance. And whenever I hear that, I always wonder what you are saying.」

「?」

「I have never thought your face is inferior to other people. Not just Jean Arkinex— of all the people I have met, I like your face the most.

Isn't that obvious? I stared at you for two whole years in the harem when you weren't speaking, and didn't get tired of you at all.」

The girl felt an urge and said without pause. She thought about what she just said and her body started turning hot.

「...—? N-No, what I just said—?」

Ikuta swiftly grabbed her hand and gently hugged the girl's back without saying anything. He then patted her head as if she was a puppy.

「Yes, how embarrassing. Saying all that with a serious face is very powerful. I shouldn't evade by hugging you, but let me off this time.」

「... Ahh… Ughh...」

「Back to the original topic… the history between that guy and me aside, we have to settle this matter diplomatically, and make it public that 'we aren't quarreling'. They must feel the same way since they apologized for instigating the fight. So let's host a party for them.」

Ikuta said all that, then added in a gentle tone.

「Let me retort you with this… Just like how you felt, whenever you demean yourself, I would feel the same way. I will be happy if you can remember that.」

When she heard that, Chamille's face turned even redder, like a ripe tomato. Ikuta held her in his arms until she calmed down.

At the same time, the Pope returned to her chambers, then knelt under the one star banner.

「... God, what what should I do...?」

She no longer hid the anguish on her face. She was troubled. This was the destiny of all Popes who stood at the top of the Church of Aldera— bearing a question she couldn't share with anyone, she endured the weight threatening to break her knees.

「... Please guide us. Shine a light to show the way forward...」

She held her partner Sprite with both hands and locked eyes with it, as if she could see the existence of god through it.

「... Oh God...」

No answer came no matter how long she waited, and the clear eyes of the Sprite only cruelly reflected her fragile face.

Early next morning, Pope Jenancy gave a notification to stop the conference for a day. Anarai who did his stretches and was raring to go was caught off guard. However, since the Pope requested time to think things over at this timing meant the old sage's questioning wasn't futile.

「Hmm, we got the day off.」

Ikuta muttered after receiving the notification, and summoned an admin officer to send a letter he drafted last night to the Kioka camp. He got a response less than ten minutes later, informing Chamille and him to visit the drawing room in front of the hearth they visited last time at 9am.

「Good morning, Major General Jean Arkinex. Pardon me for yesterday's incident.」

The first thing Ikuta did was to apologize without being monotonous. It was the same for Jean, who answered with a social mask he spent an entire night to put on.

「I should be the one apologizing. I deeply regret doing something so rash.」

After exchanging apologies, Ikuta took out the chess board he was clamping lightly under his armpit.

「Well～ I brought along a chessboard, why don't we chat over a game?」

「I will gladly take you up on your invitation.」

Jean nodded and answered robotically. Ario who was watching them covered his mouth.

「... Fufufu...」

「Prime Minister Sir!」

Miara who was serving as their escort admonished him softly. Ario wiped away his smile.

「Oh my, pardon me. Isn't it great to play a game and chat? I will just watch quietly from the side.」

「I shall do the same. The outcome of the match doesn't matter, we are here just to socialize.」

Chamille added as if she already planned to do so. Ikuta and Jean sat down on opposite sides of the chess board.

「Let's not set any time control for the game and play leisurely.」

「Very well. Let's decide who goes first.」

Jean closed his palm around a chess piece in each hand, and Ikuta chose the right hand. The hand opened, indicating that the white-haired officer would go first. They bowed and started the game.

The two of them were silent with only the sound of the pieces being moved. One minute, three minutes, five minutes passed. Chamille couldn't stand it anymore and said.

「... Cough cough. Why don't you chat a little?」

Playing chess in silence wasn't socializing. They were aware of that too, so Ikuta tossed out a topic, careful not to taunt him.

「Oh… What did you have for breakfast?」

「A simple meal of fruits and bread. I'm not very particular with food, what about you, Field Marshal Sir?」

「Well, I'm always thinking about improving the meals served on the battlefield.」

「Improve? Light, filling, and ready to eat— I think such provisions are the ideal meal for soldiers.」

「From the way I see it, that's just nutrition supplements, just making do when there's no time for a proper meal. And of course, it will be great if the nutrition supplement tastes good— but the goal should be replacing such meals.」

It wasn't cordial, but Chamille was relieved that they were having a normal conversation. Increasing the pace of his chess moves slightly, Jean said:

「Indeed, the troops prefer a warm meal, but it takes a lot of time to cook. I want to minimize the march as much as possible.」

「It should be fine for short missions, but long campaigns are another matter. And that's because shoving down a nutrition supplement and making time for a proper meal is very different in quality, before we even talk about the taste.」

Ikuta matched his increased chess pace and answered. As Chamille and Ario watched on, the board kept changing rapidly.

「Nutrition supplements are just one part of war. But eating during the lull in battle is a time for the men to heal their soul away from the war. Isn't that as important as replenishing their nutrition?」

「They are still on a mission during their meals. Is it really fine for the soldiers to take their mind off the battle? I think soldiers should have the mentally of always being prepared for battle.」

Their opinions were like two parallel lines that didn't cross. Ikuta grunted and approached from a different angle.

「Major General Arkinex, I would like to ask— When was the last time you took a vacation?」

「If you are referring to vacation days, I have two rest days a month as per military regulations. However, I will arrange some work during my vacation days too. There is always something to do.」

Jean answered quickly, and Ikuta asked again.

「My question wasn't clear— When was the last time you rested leisurely?」

His hand stopped for a few brief seconds. Jean resumed his game at a brisk pace and replied:

「I can't remember— Field Marshal Solork, you know about my nickname. My body doesn't want to rest in the first place.」

「That might not be so… Be it body or soul, people will deceive themselves some times.」

With that, their conversation ended. The two of them played at an incredible pace, the speed of their fingers were as fast as an acrobat— suddenly, Ikuta paused an informed his opponent:

「I have seen this position before.」

「It's a repetition draw. Let's reset the board.」

<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sennichite
>

Having seen the same position three times already, the two came to a consensus to reset the game. Chamille opened her eyes wide— they played to a draw even though they played at such a blistering pace. This was clearly an abnormal situation.

The second game started. Before the silence was drawn out, Ikuta tossed out a topic.

「Let's talk about something else, when did you get acquainted with Professor Anarai?」

「He provided assistance when I was suppressing a revolt in the past. It was a coincidental meeting, and I visited his lab to thank him.」

「I see… and he got interested with your insomniac body, right?」

「The Professor is still researching this and came up with several hypotheses. If his research proceeds well, then the ideal result will be for all of mankind to work just like me.」

Jean shared his wish without a second thought. At that moment, Ikuta retracted his hand reaching for the chess pieces and hugged his head.

「... What's wrong? Field Marshal Solork?」

「... No, pardon me, I just felt a headache. I’m fine now.」

That wasn’t a total lie. Ikuta pulled himself together and continued the game. Chamille watching from the side became nervous, but Ikuta continued his questions with a different attitude.

「Let’s talk about something else. What’s your hobbies?」

「Horsemanship, chess, base logistics— and things like the usage of balloons.」

Everything he listed was disciplines related to the military. This answer frustrated Ikuta, but he continued speaking without letting it show.

「... I’m impressed with how much you devote yourself to military affairs. But isn’t your life of discipline a little too much?」

「It’s troubling for you to say that. I’m not suppressing myself in the first place, I have never wanted much leisure in the first place.」

「... I see.」

「Field Marshal Solork, how are you running the Imperial military at such a young age?」

Jean asked. The dark-haired youth calmly answered.

「... I handled my duties during the spare time I have when I’m not with Chamille, and lazed as much as possible. Since this isn’t a work that I love so much that I will forgo sleep for.」

This was only natural for him, but absurd for the leader of a nation’s army. Jean pulled back his hand that was reaching for the chess pieces and held his head, reacting in the same way as Ikuta did earlier.

「...*Yah**
, as expected of the youngest Field Marshal in history, it's a piece of cake for you.」

「You can mimic me if you like. As my hobby, I recommend afternoon naps.」

Before they realized it, there was a dangerous atmosphere in the air as the two continued their game. They increased their pace even faster, taking and losing pieces as if they were in a brawl. Suddenly, they stopped.

「This position again.」

「Draw by repetition. Next game.」

They nodded at each other and cleared the board without any hesitation. Chamille sighed while Ario lowered his head to stifle his laughter.

They played three games, and all of them ended in a repetition draw, an incredible outcome. After the socializing with Jean Arkinex ended, Ikuta and Chamille walked back to their rooms along the corridor.

「... It feels like you two are conversing calmly while brawling on the chess board.」

「It's his fault for his uncute chess moves… Ahh, I wasted my energy for nothing...」

Ikuta stopped and slumped his shoulders depressedly. The girl beside her was suddenly pounced on from behind.

「Chamille～ thank you for your hard work!」

「...! V-Vackie?」

Chamille who was suddenly hugged called out a name frantically. The Scientist girl buried her face into Chamille's neck and answered:

「Really now～ I'm so dissatisfied～ Professor Anarai and the Pope are duking it out, but I have to take care of the work behind the scenes, you know? Kioka's diplomatic team is a pain to deal with, but they should run out of negotiation materials in a couple of days～」

「W-What's that got to do with embracing me...!?」

「Nothing～ at all! But I want to hug the Chamille I love whenever I have the chance! Got a problem with that!?」

Vackie squeezed harder. Chamille looked troubled, but Ikuta didn't stop his junior disciple and asked her:

「Vackie, have you met with Professor Anarai?」

「Not yet. Even if it's me, I won't take action without permission from Ikuta-nii. I won't cause any trouble, and also know that I'm not suited to handling normal diplomatic duties.」

「Why don't you visit them now? You left housesitting to Yorga, right?」

「Yay! Yorga got his eyes on things over there, so don't worry. We should be able to block him for a while longer.」

They hinted at the surveillance of Trisnai and after confirming that, they decided on their next course of action.

「You can't pass here, Field Marshal Solork Sir.」

「No admittance!」

They wanted to visit the Scientist's tent just like last time, but Harrah and Sergeant Major Mita blocked their way like a sentry. This was a reasonable response, but Ikuta smiled gently.

「Don't be so stiff, Major Harrah. I'm just bring my junior disciple to visit our teacher.」

「I'm honored that you remembered my name, but my duty is to use my big body to act as a human wall. You may enter after getting permission from His Excellency Kyakushii.」

「Get permission!」

Sergeant Major Mita repeated the tail end of Harrah's words. Blocked by the big and small human wall, Ikuta crossed his arms troublingly.

「Hmm～ I understand.」

He took a deep breath, and before the two of them could stop him, he yelled at the entrance of the tent.

「Prime Minister! Can you grant permission for me to meet with Professor Anarai!?」

The shout echoed out loud. A few seconds later, Ario poked his head out of the tent.

「Yes, it's fine. Please come in!」

He agreed easily. Ikuta shrugged and turned towards Harrah.

「That's what he said.」

「... How do you know His Excellency is inside?」

「Considering what happened yesterday, it won't be a surprise if the Prime Minister came to discuss things with the Professor. If he isn't

here, I will search elsewhere, so I figure I might as well give it a shot.
」

「Haha— I see. You got me, please go in.」

Harrah admitted defeat and opened a path with a smile. Ikuta, Chamille and Vackie visited the Scientist's nest again.

「Professor～ Long time no see～!」

「Oh, that sounds like Malvackie! You have grown big!」

Professor Anarai embraced Vackie who pounced on him, and Bajin who was focusing on his work on a table at a corner turned around in surprise.

「Huh— Oh～ it's really Malvackie! Sorry, Nazuna, I'm going off!」

「Don't think you can run.」

Bajin was about to leave when Nazuna grabbed his collar. Vackie approached her senior disciple who was flailing his arms around with a mischievous smile.

「Heehee～Bajin-nii, how mean of you to act like that when you see your junior disciple~ It's not like I'm a monster or anything～」

「Hieee! Spare me! I will give you snacks!」

「Uwah～! Hmm, what's this, confectionery? The moist texture isn't bad. Give me more, I want to share this with Chamille.」

「That's just robbery… Give them back the excess.」

When Chamille couldn't stand it anymore and stopped her, Vackie said okay and gave it a rest. Bajin was shocked by this unbelievable scene and looked at the messiah girl.

「Huh… Chamille-chan, are you on good terms with that girl? You can communicate with her?」

「Communicate… Sigh, I can make out a fifth of what she is saying.」

「We are best friends forever!」

Vackie said with her arm around Chamille's shoulder to flaunt their friendship. After glancing at them, Nazuna said to the dark-haired youth.

「... So, Ikuta, have you finished quarelling with the Kioka general?」

「I played a game of chess and made up with him just now. Please don't bring it up again, Nazuna-nee. For my mind's well being.」

「If you say so. But I won't be forgetting that scene any time soon.」

Nazuna answered with a nefarious smile. Ikuta sighed, perked himself up and turned to Professor Anarai.

「Well then, Professor. I didn't have time to say this yesterday, but you really scared me. I knew you will bring out something, but never thought you will bring smashed pieces of the Cathedral's outerwall.」

The moment Ikuta said that, the atmosphere of Bajin and the other Scientists turned tense. However, the subject himself, Professor Anarai, wasn't fazed at all.

「Ohh, about that...」 「Uwah—!」

「Professor, shut up! He's here! Sir Kyakushii is here!」

His disciples frantically stopped their teacher who was about to reveal an important secret. Seeing how tense they were, Ikuta looked at Ario who was seated in a corner of the tent.

「Oh, pardon me, I have no intention of probing this secret, I'm just here to express how surprised I was.」

「Of course, I'm sorry that my presence here have dampened your conversation.」

They chatted without a shred of sincerity. Seeing that it was time to leave, Ikuta signalled Chamille and Vackie with his eyes.

「You're too kind, I just dropped by on a whim. Well then— since my junior disciple has greeted our teacher, it's about time for us to go.」

They got ready to leave after bidding their farewells. At this moment, Ario said to Ikuta's back:

「Field Marshal Solork, did you sleep well at night?」

「— Very well. It's a bit cold here, but I can make do with a blanket.」

「I see, I'm envious. It's good to be young. I have trouble sleeping recently, and have been drinking a lot before bed.」

He said exasperatedly. Ikuta smiled and replied that he could empathize, then left for real this time.

「.. Solork, is this really fine? You didn't talk much with the Professor.」

「Yes, I learned most of the things I want to know, and it lines up with my expectations.」

「That's true. That thing is so hard～」

Vackie nodded as if she was in the know. They understood each other just from that exchange, and Chamille thought with furrowed brows:

「Ughh… What are you two talking about, am I the only one who don't understand?」

「I will explain properly at another time. I want to avoid talking about it as much as possible.」

The dark-haired youth hinted and looked behind him, then muttered:

「... In any case, I will be staying up late tonight.」

Late night. After confirming that Chamille had fallen asleep in the large carriage, Ikuta walked in the dark with his escorts.

「... This way.」

The group quickly linked up with a Kioka guide who led them forth. The two nations' armies had set up camp outside the diplomatic building, and at their borders was a campfire and two chairs, the meeting place for them on this night.

「Hi, so you're here.」

「I'm glad that you invited me after all.」

Ario who was already seated greeted him, and Ikuta raised the bottle he brought in reply. The Kioka Prime Minister twirled the wine in his glass and grinned.

「As you can see, this is a less formal venue unlike the one in the day. Please take a seat.」

Ikuta sat down with a nod and grabbed his cork. The sound of the bottle popping echoed in the night— after listening to that pleasant sound, Ario raised his glass.

「Cheers— it’s a pity that we can’t share the same drink, but let’s enjoy the campfire together. Drinking wine in a cold night like this is an enjoyable experience too.」

「True. Cheers.」

After their opening lines, the two of them emptied their glasses. Feeling the heat from the alcohol rising from his stomach, Ario said slowly:

「— Phew… Both of us have things that are inconvenient to say if the children are around, right?」

「Maybe. Although it would be better if there are fewer secrets.」

Ikuta answered with a slightly heavier tone. The Prime Minister saw that Ikuta understood his intention and asked:

「Are 『they』 doing well?」

Silence hung in the air. The youth didn’t answer immediately… The first thing that came to his mind was self reproach.

「... Not too well. They suffered heavy injuries to protect Chamille not too long ago.」

「— How serious is their injuries, and the treatment?」

Ario pressed right away. Ikuta could sense real fury from his voice, and gave minimal information.

「I can’t tell you the details, but I promise you that they are recuperating properly.」

「Was that injury unavoidable?」

「...No. First, our prediction wasn’t done well— to make up for this, they had to work really hard.」

When he heard the youth’s answer, Ario sighed heavily.

「I don’t want them to be lost so easily. Their unique talents aren’t easy to find.」

「I think so too. The same as your many other 『works』.」

There was an obvious accusatory edge in Ikuta’s voice as he continued:

「If you find other potential talents, will you give them similar education?」

「You are making it sound like brainwashing— in their case, I gave a child with no options the chance to reintegrate into society. I have never demanded them to do anything, so there’s nothing for me to feel guilty about.」

「That’s right, it’s different in nature from brainwashing… Your methods are far more advanced.」



The light from the campfire cast a shadow on Ario’s profile. Ikuta glanced sideways at him and said:

「Prime Minister, you are great at dealing with people. You can grasp what someone wants, what infuriates them, what they hate— things even the subject doesn't know themselves, and you will make arrangements to motivate and exploit them. Since these are emotions the subject already possesses, there is no coercion… Your words will permeate into your target without any resistance.」

He paused, and only the cracking sounds of the fire echoed in the darkness. Ario grunted and sipped his wine.

「like the sweet whispers of a conman leading them on— in short, you are blaming me?」

At that question, Ikuta shook his head quietly after a brief moment.

「... No. Guiding people down a certain path is something done in all forms of education. Schools nurture talents who will contribute to society, the army will train recruits to act like proper soldiers. There is nothing wrong with that.」

「That’s right. When you want to teach something, it’s impossible to do so without guiding them.」

「That’s right. Also, comparing this to the sweet whispers of a conman isn’t totally right either. Because you aren’t deceiving them. You will do your best to carry out the promise you made when you unearth these talented people, and have no interest in lying to them to benefit yourself.」

「I’m glad that you understand.」 Ario said with a smile:

In contrast, Ikuta’s face remained stiff as he continued:

「You are better than anyone at unearthing talents and nurturing them. The 『Insomniac Brilliant General』, 『Great Mother of White Wings』 and 『them』— whenever I clashed with your subordinates, I feel a chill down my spine.」

Ohh～ the Prime Minister was impressed when he mentioned those names.

「I never told you that I was the one who recruited Elulufay. I don't think she will bring it up either, so why do you think so?」

「When the Port Nemong naval battle ended, I spoke shortly with her while she was held captive. I asked her for a simple background of her growth, and your name didn't come up even once. However… when I spoke with her, I felt the something similar as the 『Insomniac Brilliant General』. Or rather, they have the same twisted nature?」

「How sharp. Are you saying all the children I nurtured are twisted?」

「You should understand the reason best.」

Ikuta's voice held a rage beyond just an accusatory hint, his clenched fists on his knees were shaking.

「Jean Arkinex who lost his country and best friend over a meaningless war, works tirelessly to achieve the dream of Kioka prosperity and long lasting peace. He even gave up on sleep which is the right given to all of mankind… However, when will his efforts bear fruit? A hundred years? Three centuries? Half a millennium? The only certain thing is that his work will never end in his lifetime. That guy is attempting to exhaust hs entire life for something that he will never see the results of, and you are pushing him on by agreeing with him.」

「……」

「Similarly, Elulufay Tenerexilla who can't give birth because of the nature of her body. She claims every crew member in her fleet is her child, using her love to stave off her loneliness… However, since she was an admiral, deaths amongst her subordinates is unavoidable in war. If she lives like this, she will experience the loss of her children over and over again. She will feel the excruciating pain that others couldn't even bear for once. And you are the one who guided her down such a life.」

Ario was silent, and ikuta continued to press him.

「And 『them』, whose personality split because of the abusive environment they were raised in.

Showing their kind personality when building trust, and showing their malicious character after gaining that trust— By switching their personalities, they achieve great results as spies… But performing such works is like stamping out the sand castle they painstakingly built. When their mission is accomplished, all that is left is just barren and ashened grounds. You know that, but you still whispered to them to just treat betrayal like a job.」

He knew very clearly how this contradiction will torture their soul. Ikuta could see very clearly in his mind how she attempted suicide before she could kill a comrade.

「And also— the royal family girl who was born at the dusk of the Empire, Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik.」

The youth mentioned the name of the girl he was trying to save with all his might.

「I heard you got in contact with that child when she stayed in Kioka as a political hostage. She is smart, and is troubled by her status

since she was young— and you targeted her worries to poison her. Because you predict her existence might be the key to the downfall of the Empire in the future.」

「......」

「When I first met her, she would mention every now and then that her blood is corrupted… She is strict with herself in all matters, and her sense of duty as a royal only strengthened that trend. However, she won't be so twisted with just that. Her eyes are only focused on her own demise. She yearns for the royal family to get it's just deserts for their long tyrannical rule… because of the curse you put on her!」

He was yelling towards the end. Ikuta took deep breaths before continuing:

「This is the thing you should be faulted for. Be it Jean Arkinex, Elulufay Tenerexilla, 『them』, or Chamille— as an adult, you should be saving them instead.

… Not urging a boy who lost everything to spend his entire life in pursuit of grandiose ideals.

… Not giving a woman who can't become a mother children who will die, no matter how much she showers them with love.

… Not let a girl who has been betrayed repeatedly, make a living by betraying others.

… Not let a girl with self loathe have the delusion that her own destruction will lead to salvation.

A simpler warmth. A salvation within reach. A simple happiness that will satisfy a person— with your ability, you could have given them all that.」

The youth closed his eyes as if to mourn a dream he couldn't realize. Ario finished the wine in his glass as he listened.

「... I'm honestly surprised. You understand me far better than I expected.」

He offered his compliments. However— the perfect smile on his face wasn't fazed at all.

「You are correct. I took them out of their horrible situation, but I didn't save their souls. More specifically, I have no intention of doing so. Do you know why?」

Ario asked Ikuta about his state of mind. Ikuta stared at the fire and answered plainly.

「Because doing so will make them less useful to you?」

The Prime Minister nodded and asked without any hesitation.

「Full marks. Indeed— I can say for certain that there is nothing more boring than humans who found salvation.」

He said coldly in a voice that would send a shiver down anyone's spine.

Ario's gaze turned to the night sky, lamenting that he couldn't see the stars because of the cloudy sky, and said:

「Let's talk about the past— Long ago, I had a respected teacher. She was an elegant, knowledgeable and intelligent woman who had an extraordinary drive to get things done. I admire her both as a person and as a politician. This is embarrassing, but I must have a crush on her back then too.」

Even though she was much older than me, Ario said with a laugh. Ikuta frowned, unsure about how much he should believe this

formidable foe. The man knew how Ikuta felt and continued honestly.

「Back then, I was just a lowly paid assistant, but I felt it was great that I could support her with my work. The tasks she assigned me weren't easy, but worth doing. Also— this is a simple motivation, but I was happy that my efforts were improving the lives of the people… You might not believe this, but many politicians are driven by this feeling.

My most memorable moment was diverting the river that frequently floods a village away, a big project that drastically reduced floods. I was impressed by my teacher’s performance. She formulated a plan that took years, was given an enormous budget, recruited skilled construction workers, balanced the various interest groups, negotiated with the residents ahead of time— they were all difficult jobs, and she ran between the groups repeatedly.

I spent the busy days alongside her, and I asked her one day, why did she worked so hard?」

Ario said with nostalgic eyes, and recalled the answer he got back then:

「She said, because she understood what being impoverished was like. I knew her background very well. Being impoverished would constraint the possibility of a person by a lot, and it was incredibly hard to break out of that situation by themselves. There’s an old saying… shouldering the expectation of the entire village or something? She was just like that. She was raised in a poor fishing village on the south coast, and most of the villagers could only write their own names. However, when there is a smart child in the village, everyone will pool their money and send the child to a nearby town to learn from the merchants, and hope the child will bring money back to the village one day.」

「......」

「She learned all sorts of things from the merchants— she told me that her worldview changed completely, and she had choices in all sorts of things. That's right, I think you understand that having a choice is the most prominent feature of wealth. An impoverished life lacks choices. Food, clothes, job, marriage partner— She realized things she had no choice in the past can be changed depending on the methods and capabilities. And that was the beginning of everything.」

Ario said as he picked up the bottle from the ground and poured another glass.

「Anyway, she worked hard to earn money, and when she reached a significant sum, she would hand over half the amount to the village chief, and asked him to improve the lives of everyone. The village chief accept it happily, and the funds were invested into the development of the village according to the village's judgement— what do you think happened?」

「... The operation ended in a failure.」

「That's right. That is just a simple fishing village, and the villagers don't know any other way of earning money aside from fishing. The ocean there wasn't bountiful in the first place, and their income doesn't increase by much even with the purchase of new boats and fishing equipment. And of course, the situation can only be improved by taking a different path than before— but they don't understand. It's not that they refuse to try other methods, they just weren't aware of other ways. The money she gave the village didn't bring prosperity, and was wasted.」

Ikuta could see the sad story before his eyes. Ario continued:

「When she returned to the village a few years later and saw that the living conditions were the same, she understood that money alone wasn't enough to change the lives of the people. Someone needed to consider things carefully and make good use of the funds— which means governance. And so, she launched her career in politics.」

Ario raised his glass, as if he was toasting the birth of a hero from the past.

「That was the source of his motivation towards administration. Simply put, she couldn't leave the people who experienced the same thing she did alone. *Their lives can be improved if they do that* — once she felt that way, she had to say it out loud. The flood control work was an extension of that too. The planning was difficult and there was in danger of falling through numerous times— but she overcame it with her passion. Back then, I felt that I was witnessing the triumphant return of a hero.」

「……」

「Her achievements made her famous, and she strived to go into the political world in central. Because that will give her access to more funds to work on bigger projects. She visited and made acquaintances with people in power, and I accompanied her. I was hoping she would reach new heights, just like the time she worked on the flood control.」

His cheerful tone stopped here. Ario continued in a plain voice.

「However, my expectations were betrayed. No, more accurately speaking, she was successful— but her drive to take action fell as her status rose— was age wearing her down? No. What deteriorated was her passion… By then, she no longer visited the slums and gave instructions to improve the living conditions of the people. She found

a comfortable home in the clean part of the city, and held meetings with powerful people all day..」

As if he was recalling the disappointment and frustration from back then, Ario sighed:

「I only realized the reason for that change too late— she was too far away from poverty. When she made up her mind to move into central, and only spending time with the privileged class, she was too far away from the impoverished. She couldn't see the true situation of the poor while she lived in the well sanitized part of the city. Her fervour to eliminate poverty gradually weakened. There was no reason for her to reject her easy and comfortable life.」

The ideal image of a hero slowly crumbled before him. Ario sipped his wine, as if he was tasting the bitterness of that event.

「You understand now? She was raised in poverty and faced it at all times, that's why she became a hero. After she was saved from that predicament— she lost herself in a leisurely life.」

「......」

「She could no longer go back to her old self. When I was certain of that, I toppled her from power and took over her land. I still believe that was the right decision. But at the same time, I was filled with regret.

Why didn't I notice earlier? Before she found salvation, and she had become a mere mortal that can be found anywhere— I should have pulled her back to her old self.」

I should have made things more painful for her— the man said. He should have made her live with impoverishment, so she would struggle with it endlessly. I want to accompany and support her while she did that.

「As the saying goes, there are two tragedies in life. One is not achieving your dreams, and the other is achieving your dreams… The former is a tragedy of forcing the birth of a hero before his time, while the latter is a tragedy of the hero's demise. And so, I have been working hard to create the former, and being careful to not let the latter happen.」

This is the philosophy of Ario Kyakushii. At this point, Ikuta completely understood the mentality of the foes he had engaged, and felt equal amounts of fear and disgust.

「Jean's way of life is fine as it is. Elulufay, until recently, 『them』, and of course Chamille too— as long as they are alive, they will continue working and not lose themself in happiness. This process will help Kioka's development greatly. Because they aren't saved, they could achieve greatness that isn't possible for the mediocre mob. Don't you think that is just wonderful?」

Ikuta spent some time finding the right words, so he won't budge one bit before the opponent seeking to destroy Chamille, and launch a counterattack.

「... A man sprinting towards his goal will stop sooner or later. They will either reach the goal or get too tired to continue midway, no one will run forever.」

「...Hmm?」

「The sacrifice and efforts of people striving towards a goal will move the hearts of the audience, right? However— that's not something that can be consumed by people other than themselves. Ario Kyakushii, have you seriously not considered? What you are doing is burning out the people working the hardest for the nation, leaving not even a speck of dust. A country that feeds off people like

this— that's no different from the Empire two years ago. Is that the Kioka you want?」

In response to the youth's question, the Kioka Prime Minister showed a perfect smile.

「People can live beautifully when they devote their all for something. That means my ideal Kioka will be a nation that continues to produce these kinds of people. What's the problem with that?」

With his eyes on the fire before him, Ikuta said with steel-like resolve.

「I have to object to the premise of your theory. Because someone obtained happiness, they can share that with even more people. A country without a cycle of happiness has no future. That is my answer.」

They fell silent after those words. They didn't speak again and ended the meeting on that night.

The next day at 10 am, the same group as before gathered at the conference hall. Anarai Khan who led a group of Scientists in white coats stood silently at the other end of the round table, and said to Pope Labutesuma opposite him:

「We waited for a day, Pope. Have you finished your discussion with god yet?」

「......」

He didn't get any answer. Anarai who was hoping something will change after one day shrugged a little disappointedly.

「It’s not much of a quarrel if I’m the only one speaking. Did you spend the entire day thinking about what to say? I’m looking forward to conversing with you.」

Even after urging her that far, the Pope still didn’t react. She was showing a poker face, but there was a hint of deep struggle and fatigue about her. Unable to restart the debate, the Scientists all looked flustered.

While the air was getting heavy— all the Sprites in the hall started speaking to the surprise of everyone.

「「「「「「「The application to reveal classified information to the subject of assistance, has been accepted. As a condition, the subject of assistance has to prove they meet the level of intelligence.」」」」」」」

Everyone looked at the Sprites around them in surprise. The Sprites on the tables, chairs and pouch all had hollow eyes as they said the same lines.

「「「「「「「—Repeat. The application to reveal classified information to the subject of assistance, has been accepted. As a condition, the subject of assistance has to prove they meet the level of intelligence.—」」」」」」」

Ikuta leaned forward and stared at Kusu who was repeating itself— This situation was similar to the Jade Voice Broadcast that happened during the military coup, but not exactly the same. The Jade Voice Broadcast made all the Imperial Sprites within the Empire utter the same words. But this was Ra Saia Alderamin, and the Sprites of all nations were acting the same way, differing from the Jade Voice Broadcast in some ways.

「——」

And the one who was the most wide eyed and shocked of them all was Pope Jenancy Labutesuma. The Sprites stopped speaking a few minutes later, and quiet returned to the hall. She squeezed her words out weakly.

「—...... God has given out a trial.」

All the attendees focused their gazes on her. The Pope continued as she suppressed her quivering shoulders.

「Pack your belongings immediately and prepare to set off to the location designated by the Sprites. If you pass the trial, you should get some answers from god— I will join you and witness it all.」

She left right after that, ignoring the Scientists who tried to stop her. General Akgarpa and the priests followed frantically behind the Pope, leaving the Imperial and Kioka attendees in the hall.

「... Sir Kyakushii. The Sprites...」

At this moment, Jean realized something has changed. Chamille and Ikuta were drawn to the same thing at the same time. Including Kusu, all the Sprites in the hall were pointing in the same direction.

「Solork, That's...!」

「... That direction… The north?」

Ikuta checked with his compass to confirm. The unexpected situation made all the Scientists tense— The old sage at the centre of them all grinned.

「We finally got a response— get your act together, looks like the main event is coming up.」

With those words, everyone present felt something instinctively. This wouldn't end with just a simple conference.

Chapter 2: The Trial of God

It was a cloudy day, and three units wearing different uniforms advanced to the north side by side.

Imperial soldiers, Kioka troops, Alderamin Holy army— there weren't any clashes between them, and the scene of them heading towards the same destination without obstructing each other was an abnormal scene. Their complicated faces made this clear.

「— Things are developing in a strange direction.」

The Imperial forces were positioned to the east of the coalition. In the middle of their group, Third Grade Administrative Officer Yorga watched the scene outside the large carriage and commented. He was voicing the thoughts of all the passengers in the carriage, and also all the soldiers marching outside too.

「Putting the Three Nation Conference on hiatus, and following the lead of the Sprites with no idea what lies ahead… It's rare for us to be a situation where the future is unpredictable.」

Yorga looked back inside the carriage. Ikuta who was seated on a chair nodded firmly.

「... The Empire, Kioka and Ra Saia Alderamin. With no regards to our allegiance, all the Sprites present gave the same information, so it's clear how abnormal this is. If there really is something at the destination, we can't let Kioka go there alone.」

「You are saying that from the perspective of a Field Marshal, right?」

Vackie who was seated beside Chamille on the bed added mischievously. The tension on Ikuta's face vanished, and a bold grin similar to his junior disciple appeared on his face.

「Yes, that's right— As a Scientist, I don't want to miss such an interesting situation.」

The youth declared. It was hard to tell what the future might bring, but that only excites the Scientists. However, the Empress couldn't change her attitude on a snap like them, and pondered seriously.

「I can't imagine what will happen next… at the same time, I can't tell what Pope Labutesuma is thinking. What exactly is a 『Trial of God』?」

「This term appears every now and then in the bible. From the impression I get from reading the whole book, it's an unreasonable request god made to important religious figures.」

「Important religious figures… And right now, it means...」

「Given how the trial started, the figure probably is Professor Anarai.」

When she heard Ikuta's deduction, Chamille crossed her arms and considered it.

「... I don't understand. To the Church of Aldera, Professor Anarai is a dangerous man they branded a Heretic, right? For someone like that to follow the footsteps of previous saints and accept a Trial of God. And the Pope acknowledged that?」

「The Pope acknowledged that— I don't think her reaction was because of that. She looked like she had no choice… And going by that, we should consider that the 『Trial of God』 is decided and executed by an authority higher than the Pope.」

「An existence higher than the top dog of the Church of Aldera. What can that be?」

「That's what we are going to find out.」

Ikuta said and turned his gaze to the table. Chamille and Ikuta's partner Sprites, Kusu and Shia, were standing side by side on the table. They were no longer acting hollow like a Jade Voice Broadcast, but they were pointing in the same direction after what happened in the conference hall.

「Besides— I might have said that the trial is for Professor Anarai, but maybe we will all be participating. As you can see, Kusu and Shia are pointing to the north too.」

Chamille looked on worriedly, while Ikuta leaned closer to the Sprites and asked:

「Hey, Kusu, Shia. What can we find at the destination?」

「I'm sorry Ikuta, I'm afraid I can't answer that.」

「……」

Kusu looked troubled while Shia shook its head in silence. Ikuta smiled with a nod.

「It's fine, thank you.」

I should be asking someone else
, Ikuta thought as he looked in the direction they were pointing at. Yorga asked him with a restrained voice.

「As a Scientist, I'm also excited by this situation… but don't let your guard down as a commander, Sir. Depending on what we find at the destination, we might clash against the Kioka and the Ra Saia Alderamin forces.」

「Yes. It’s not easy to deal with enemies moving alongside us, so we have to be careful.」

When he heard this advice, Ikuta focused on the other two units advancing beside them— since they were from Kioka and Ra Saia Alderamin, the two groups weren’t acting completely in concert. However, he couldn’t show any opening when he was engrossed in untangling the mystery— the youth put all that aside for now and looked at Yorga unhappily:

「By the way, Yorga— You don’t have to keep that tone with me inside the carriage. That makes it hard for me to judge when I can relax.」

「I-I know. But given my current situation, I think it’s better to be more alert… I’m your senior disciple after all.」

The youth with a monocle averted his face after saying that. Vackie butted in right away.

「Hmm～ Yoyo is trying to redeem himself. Ikuta-nii, you will address the other seniors with nii or nee, right? But you only call Yoyo directly by his name, and he is actually very bothered by it. Well, it can’t be help given how you two first met.」

「What...!」

Yorga turned beet red and covered the girl’s mouth. Ikuta stroked his chin in deep thought:

「...Yorga-nii… Uwah, no, it sounds weird.」

「You don’t have to call me that! And don’t believe everything she says!」

Yorga pulled Vackie's cheek as he yelled. The dark-haired youth added with a wry smile.

「Sigh— from the beginning, I think Yorga is closer to being a fellow Scientist around my age instead of a senior disciple. I'm not comparing you to others and belittling you. To be honest, Bajin-nii did as many retarded things as you too.」

「Bajin-nii～ I always feel like tricking him out of some spare change whenever I see him.」

The girl in a white coat nodded repeatedly. Ikuta looked at Yorga with a sigh:

「... You are plenty respectable to me just from the fact you can rein this girl in. Be confident, Yorga. You are outstanding as a Scientist, bureaucrat, and zookeeper of an exotic animal.」

The forthright praise made Yorga blink. He then turned his face away, pushed up his monocle and muttered in a deep voice:

「... Hmmp, with my wisdom, this is a piece of cake...」

「You are smirking, Yoyo. So easy to deal with～ it's cute how easy you are to deal with～!」

Vackie said loudly as she hugged Yorga's waist. While Yorga was struggling to break away, the carriage stopped. Lucanti who was standing guard outside knocked and entered the carriage.

「The Sprites with the unit in front have stopped pointing. Please get ready to disembark.」

Ikuta grabbed his walking stick and stood up immediately. Even Chamille who was always watching him felt that the youth's eyes were 50% brighter.

The five of them got off the large carriage and headed to the front of the unit. The Scientists in white coats were already there and bustling around. Anarai surveyed the area.

「Oh— so this is the trial grounds?」

Jean who was beside him was also sweeping his eyes around the area. He then tilted his head.

「*Mum*
*, at a glance, this is just an empty plain. There are no significant terrain around here.」

「Nazuna, how are the Sprites?」

Anarai asked his assistant. She answered with the Sprite in her arms.

「... Still the same, it stopped pointing northwards after entering this area. If I asked for the next instruction—」

Nazuna then asked the Sprite. The Sprite seemed to go into a trance and said:

「Stand at the center of the circle.」

Seeing the Sprite answered monotonously, Nazuna turned to her teacher:

「— That's what it will say.」

「Hmm, center of the circle, huh?」

Anarai snorted. At this moment, Ikuta who came to them joined in the discussion.

「If we want to find the center, we will need to know where is the edge of the circle.」

That’s the first thing the youth said, and then surveyed the area.

「Since there are no manmade structures or prominent landmarks, we can only follow the guidance of the Sprite. Why don’t we start with that?」

「I’m of the same mind. What do you think, Jean?」

The old sage asked his other disciple. The white-haired officer glared at Ikuta and then nodded.

「...*Yah*
*, I agree. Let’s mobilize the troops to investigate the surroundings.
」

「How about sending out the same number of disarmed troops from both sides?」

The dark-haired youth proposed and Jean considered it.

「... That’s fine, but it will cause confusion if both units work at the same place. This might be temporary, but I still want a proper chain of command.」

「That’s easy, just let Professor Anarai take overall command.」

Ikuta suggested as if he had planned to do so from the very start. He was so bold that Jean was a little taken aback. Ikuta wasn’t concerned that Professor Anarai was part of the Kioka camp right now.

The dark-haired youth had absolute trust in the master-disciple relationship that superseded the international structure— and the old sage proved worthy of his trust.

「Good— Ikuta, Jean, both of you lead 200 soldiers each and find the boundary where the Sprites start acting differently!」

「Understood!」 「*Yah*
*!」

They took immediate action on their teacher's orders. After ironing out the search area they were responsible for, they issued orders to their respective battalion.

「Pay attention to your Sprite partner's action, and slowly walk over!!」

「When the Sprite return to normal, stop immediately!」

Their instructions were almost identical. They spread the soldiers out, then move slowly in the direction that their Sprite partner was pointing. The Sprite will stop pointing within a certain range, and the soldiers will stop there.

「Ohh— I see, I see.」

By repeating these steps, Anarai could see a pattern in the soldiers' positions. When all the soldiers stopped, the old sage gave further instructions to his two disciples.

「Can you spread the soldiers as evenly as possible?」

Ikuta and Jean started shifting the soldiers. A few minutes later, the soldiers from both units were standing equidistant from each other on a line where the Sprite's action changed. And so, the human wall surrounding Professor Anarai from afar formed a circle.

「Good, good, I can see clearly now.」

The old sage has a satisfied smile. After finishing up his instructions to his men, Jean ran over.

「Do you need to survey from the air? I can prepare a balloon if need be.」

「No, that’s not necessary. Since it said that this is a circle, doing this should be their goal. To find the center, first—」

Professor Anarai suddenly stopped, then thought for a moment.

「— Hmm. Yes, that’s right—Chamille, can you calculate the center of the circle?」

「Ehh...?」

The old sage suddenly asked her, which troubled Chamille who had mentally withdrawn to the back line. Her escort Lucanti said in her stead.

「? The center should be around here.」

She said as she walked to a position roughly in the centre of the circle of soldiers. Professor Anarai looked at her with his arms on his waist.

「Are you sure? The true center might be two steps to the north. No no, maybe three steps to the south. Or slightly to the west or east〜」

「Huh? Huhh?」

The female knight crossed her arms with her head tilted at that. The old sage laughed and continued:

「Saying 『around here』, means you don’t truly know where the center of the circle is. To find it, you need to know the nature of a circle— what will you do?」

When he looked again, Chamille was trying to solve the problem before her. She drew a circle in her mind and thought about how to find the center.

「... If it’s on a paper, pick two spots on the circumference, use a compass to draw two new circles, then draw a line through the two intersections. That line will pass through the center. Repeat the process to get another line, and the intersect of these two lines will be the center. However...」

<https://www.wikihow.com/Find-the-Center-of-a-Circle#Using-Overlapping-Circles
Method 2>

「We don’t have a compass to draw a circle at this scale.」

Professor Anarai’s words made Chamille change her path of reasoning— The method used on a desk wouldn’t work here. She needed a method suitable at such a scale.

「... Scale down the relative position of the soldiers onto a map… No, that’s too much. There’s no need to go that far just to find the center of the circle.」

A similar method of measurements flashed across Chamille’s mind, but she thought of a simpler method midway. After confirming she didn’t left anything out, she said:

「— Draw two triangles with points on the circumference. By using a Luminous Sprite Searchlight, we can ensure the lines are straight. If we use a spirit level, we can keep the light beam at the same height. We just need to pull taut ropes through the hypotenuse of both triangles, and their intersect will be the center. How’s that?」

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thales%27s_theorem
>

「Yes, correct! Smart girl!」

The old sage patted the Empress' head. She was surprised by that, but Chamille didn't reject him. Maybe because the old man was Ikuta's teacher, or maybe it's the air about him— She only met him recently, but this felt like a gentle grandfather praising her for some reason.

「Set point A at the top of the circle, and draw out two lines separated by a 90 degree angle. The intersect between the line and the circle will be point B and point C respectively. For the triangle ABC, the hypotenuse BC is the diameter of the circle. Repeat the same step with point D and draw the hypotenuse EF. The intersect of hypotenuse BC and hypotenuse EF is the center of the circle.」

The old sage explained the method used by Chamille, urging his disciples to put it to practical use. Chamille was impressed by the Scientists' swift actions to find the spot.

「There are other ways, but considering the hassle, we should try this method— seems like they found it.」

Once they got to work, it was finished in no time. When everything was done, Nazuna stood at the intersection between the two ropes. At that moment, all the Sprites in the soldiers' hands reacted at the same time.

「...! Professor, the Sprites!」

「It's pointing in a different direction! Westwards!」

Ikuta and Jean shouted. Anarai nodded with a grunt.

「This means we solved the first riddle, huh? What an intrinsic design.」

The old sage said sarcastically and started moving with the Scientists. Chamille wanted to return to the carriage too, and gestured at Lucanti who was the closest to her.

「... Your Majesty, I'm still confused no matter how hard I think.」

Before she could say anything, the female knight approached her with tears in her eyes.

「... That's how it is, Lucanti. Like what he said, because all sum of the angles in a triangle is 180...」

「Ugghhh...!」

The large carriage set off again, and Chamille was teaching the logic in solving this problem. The other three looked at them and thought about what happened earlier.

「... Hey, Ikuta.」

「......」

「Unlike you, I didn't study the bible closely. Just to confirm… Does all the Trials of God involve geometric questions?」

Ikuta shook his head in response to Yorga's plain question.

「If that's true, then the preaching of the priests will be more interesting— the trials depicted by the Church of Aldera are basically the endurance of suffering. Trying to solve the problem with tricks are viewed as being shallow, and is a taboo. No, the stories will even say that it makes matters worse—」

「—Church of Aldera have doubts on the 『advancement of human knowledge』 itself. Their teachings are filled with resignation and helplessness. Instead of intelligence, they promote justice and mental endurance— how did such a mentality come about?」

At the same time, in the carriage Kioka's diplomats were traveling in, Prime Minister Ario Kyakushii was holding a similar discussion.

「We can assume it happened like this. In the past, god suffered one, two or maybe three huge setbacks. The sort of mistake that arises from acting too smart. I don't know the details or how long ago it happened— maybe the 『Science』 that Professor Anarai is promoting isn't a foreign concept at that time. Now we know that god knows about geometry, that possibility is even higher.」

Ario smiled after saying that. Instead of a deduction, this was closer to a riddle, and the diplomats didn't know how to answer. One of them asked something that was more pressing.

「But Sir… for such a big event, is it really fine to investigate it in collaboration with the Imperials? Since Professor Anarai's words triggered this incident, we can continued with just us and Ra Saia Alderamin...」

「That's hard to say. I'm not sure what the criterias set by God are, but maybe having the representatives of all three nations present is one such condition. The Sprites from the Imperial side are showing changes similar to ours. Even leaving that aside, the pressure of two nations investigating is different from going it with just one nation.」

The diplomats crossed their arms in deep thought. Ario calmly warned the diplomats who wanted to maximize their gains.

「I understand you want to monopolize the results, and I have no complaints if that is possible. But don’t forget, we are facing an unknown entity. Field Marshal Ikuta Solork’s imperial forces are a reliable ally here. More importantly, he will actively cooperate with Professor Anarai, which is great. Without any need to reorganize, we have twice the number of people participating in the investigations. 」

Sigh, quarrels between children are unavoidable
— the man added with a smile. He was referring to the relationship between his adopted son Jean and the Imperial Field Marshal Ikuta Solork. It wasn’t clear how he felt about it though.

「In any case, this has become the battlefield of the Scientists, so we politicians should retreat to the backline— to be frank, the old sage probably doesn't think too much of Kioka as his home. The situation in the Empire is vastly different from the time when he was persecuted and fled from it. I don’t want to do anything to earn his ire.」

「In that case, we can’t let him...!」

The diplomats refuted anxiously, but Ario shook his head.

「It’s the opposite. It’s impossible to put a collar on Anarai Khan. I have realized painfully over the years that his talents are closely tied to his freedom, that old sage will only stay true to himself. If we try to twist or rob him of his way of life, he will slip away like a cunning fish.」

Ario shrugged lightly— he was proficient in seeing through someone’s true nature and leading them on, but he had not found

any openings on Anarai Khan yet. The diplomats close to Ario were surprised. This was a rare moment where the man admitted defeat.

「We are just his sponsors. From our position, we just have to ensure these Scientists are treated well. Doing that is better than any collar, and will tie them down in Kioka forever.」

Raising one white flag wouldn't shake Ario Kyakushii's policies. Things he couldn't change would be left alone, and he would search for a better way to exploit things with that in mind. The key of politics wasn't changing something, but to control things that wouldn't change as much as possible. The experienced Ario knew this very well.

「Researching the unknown is the only thing that drives him, ignoring all seduction or misdirection── I just can't get along with this old man.」

Even so, he would exploit him as much as possible. Including his magnanimity, he was a politician through and through.

After that, the days of them guided by the Sprites to solve the question given by 'god' started. Shortly after the second question was issued, Anarai gathered his disciples and discussed the plan in the future.

「── What number do we use for π? We usually use 3.14 as an approximation, by dividing the circumference into 92.」

「That is the most practical number to be used right now. Let's keep using it if the one asking questions have no problems.」

「You know geometry right, Field Marshal Solork. I don't want anyone to hold me back at this juncture.」

「I should be asking you, Major General. You do know how to calculate the area of a triangle, right? As your senior disciple, I don't mind teaching you.」

With how things were, it was impossible for these two to not compete. The questions given by god got more complicated with time, and they used all of their knowledge to solve them.

「Professor Anarai! This part and that part are similar!」

「Professor Anarai! As expected, the length of FG needs to be adjusted because of the elevation difference!」

They would get off the carriage and send out the troops at every stop, try to solve the question they see, then seek Professor Anarai's opinion before executing their plans. And of course, everything was proceeding swiftly and efficiently/

Not just the accuracy of their answers, the time taken, effort, resource used, creativity and aesthetics— Ikuta and Jean pulled out all the stops to compete with each other. This was like a fist fight with their brains.

「That method is not elegant and has too many tedious parts! My solution is obviously better!」

「Picture puzzles should be solved mechanically! It will waste too much time if we wait for inspiration to strike!」

「The angles here and there contradict each other! Can't your men even measure properly?」

「You can adjust yourself if it's just this much measurement error! Measurements on the field is different from doing so on your desk!
」

They bickered and vent their dissatisfaction on each other as they solved the questions faster than the other Scientists— Or rather, no one could be bothered to intrude into their quarrels. Obviously, nothing good could be gained by getting between those two gears spinning at top speed.

「... The investigation is proceeding smoothly despite their vicious squabbles.」

「The pace has gotten faster instead, since they are inciting each other 24 hours a day!」

「... I was planning to ask them to exercise self restraint, but...」

With a situation like this, even Chamille, Vackie and Yorga could only keep their distance and watch. The same goes for Jean's aides too.

「... W-What should I do...」

「There's nothing we can do. It's better for outsiders not to intervene.」

Miara was at a loss while Harrah was fine with staying on the sidelines.

There were a myriad of different thoughts, but only Anarai was showing a sincere smile.

「Fufufu— I'm glad to see you both so full of life.」

On the evening of the 17th day after the trials began. Both units were prepared to break for camp, and Jean returned to his camp after a day battling against his rival. Miara who was waiting in his tent stood up.

「G-Good work today, Jean. The investigation is proceeding smoothly—」

「Not at all! That guy solved one of the problems today too!」

Jean cut her off with a frustrated tone, then sat before his desk with a glum face. His aide Harrah looked his way with a shrug.

「Hey hey, you don't need to get so mad. You don't have to prove your excellence anymore, and things will move along no matter which side solve the riddle.」

「No— the number of questions solved represents the results achieved. Leaving how 'God' will judge this aside, there is a significant impact diplomatically. Do you get it, Harrah? I don't want to give that guy any edge at all!」

Jean explained his rationale, but he was far from calm. He took out pen and paper and listed out all the questions that have been solved.

「There's twelve questions now… I can see some trends here. At this stage, I can make some predictions. Just you wait, Solork, I won't let you have your way from tomorrow onwards...!」

The white-haired officer muttered the name of his nemesis as he wrote ferociously. Harrah threw his hands up in defeat at the sight of his back, then left the tent with his fellow aide.

「He won't listen to anything we say. He's always like this when he meets Ikuta Solork. Sigh, the other party is just as triggered too.」

Harrah said as he looked down at the Imperial's camp because of how tall he was. On the other hand, Miara was sullen because she couldn't communicate properly with her superior.

「Don't make that face. Think of it this way, this is a good chance. After seeing him daily, Jean will get used to his existence, and keep his calm in their next battle. This situation happening as part of the Three Nation Conference is a boon for us.」

Harrah thought optimistically. Miara wasn't convinced and complained in a weak voice.

「With how things are going… I'm of no help to Jean at all.」

「Don't be daft. Body guard duty, taking care of the soldiers here and minding the logistics— Jean can spare the effort to compete because he left these tasks to you. You are a great help.」

「Even if it's not me, others can do the same too.」

「No one can do it exactly the same way as you. Be it the filing of paperwork or the way you admonish the troops. For better or worse, this is what Jean needs. You know it's true.」

He complimented and encouraged her blatantly, but her eyes were still gloomy. Harrah took Miara's hand and walked under the evening sky.

「You are too stubborn, relax a little. And luckily, there's an activity happening there.」

The two passed through the camp that was filled with smoke from the cooking hearth, and quickly reached the area bordering the Imperial camp. A large space had been set up there, with lots of soldiers shooting targets or practicing their swordsmanship according to troop types. The onlookers chatted loudly and would cheer when they saw any exceptional performances.

「... W-What's going on here? Kioka and Imperial troops mingling together...」

「Just a sideshow. Unlike the excited Scientists, the soldiers are bored. Instead of letting them wait during the lull time between investigations, it's better for volunteers to have friendly matches— I heard Field Marshal Solork proposed this during the day.」

「What...! Kioka and the Empire are at war, what's so friendly about that!?」

「Because the Prime Minister agreed to this. Sigh, don't be stiff, just think of it as intimidating and probing each other out. We will hide important secrets and at the same time, observe the standards of the their troops.」

Harrah said with a laugh, but his eyes were sharp as he watched the Imperials' movements. Miara had to focus too. The enemy they had to fight was showing their skills, and there was no reason not to observe them.

After observing for a while, Harrah suddenly felt one of the troop types was more heated than the others.

「The swordsmanship place is really popular. Let's take a look.」

「No, I—」

「Let's go.」

The buff officer took his colleagues hand again and walked on— From where they were, they could see the wooden sword of a losing participant flying up into the air.

「— That's the match! Victor, Imperial Army Captain Lucanti Hargunska!」

The referee called the match and the Imperial soldiers erupted in cheers, while the Kioka troops groaned with disappointment.

「Well done～ Captain Hargunska～!」 「That's the spirit of the Imperial army! Give it your all～!」

「... How strong. That's 8 consecutive wins.」 「We can't give up, I will go next!」

The Kioka soldiers on standby were spurred by the defeat of their comrade and volunteered. The lightly armoured Imperial soldier was waiting for the next challenger in front of them.

「Ohh～ our men suffered consecutive defeat? The opponent… seems to be a woman.」

「Woman—?」

This made Miara walk forth with a changed expression. Harrah held her back by the shoulder.

「Calm down, she isn't using dual blades or has red hair, definitely not from the Igsem clan. But I have seen her face around the Empress several times...」

As they watched, a Kioka soldier who was charging forth was sent flying to the ground. When he was getting up, the tip of his opponent's sword was in front of him, and the referee called the match. Harrah whistled at that.

「Phew～ she won again— Oh? She's coming over.」

Her gaze had turned towards them before they knew it, and she approached boldly. Her plaids on both sides of her head fluttered in the wind as the Imperial soldier who scored nine consecutive victories saluted.

「Nice to meet you! I'm Imperial Captain Lucanti Hargunska, my partner water Sprite is Niji. You two must be Kioka officers, right!?」

「Y-Yes… I'm Kioka Army Major Miara Gin, my partner water Sprite is Yaoi. This is my colleague Taznyado Harrah.」

「Thank you for giving me your names, I'm honored. Pardon me for asking— is that a Yaponiku blade on your waist behind you?」

Lucanti said with a glance to her waist. Miara nodded with her eyes wide open.

「... Yes, that’s right. I’m impressed that you can tell, the blade is mostly covered by my body.」

「So I’m right! Aside from the unique hilt design, your footwork made it clear you are not an ordinary woman. So I was wondering if you are a Yaponiku swordsman I heard of in tales!」

The female knight nodded, feeling gleeful that her speculation was right. However, Miara shook her head.

「I’m not good enough to be a swordsman… So, you are interested in Yaponiku swords?」

「Yes! If possible, I would like to take some pointers from you!」

Lucanti looked right at Miara and requested. Her eyes were sparkling with expectations of fighting a strong foe with a sword, and didn’t even consider the possibility that she would be rejected.

「......!」

Miara suddenly felt an irritation in her chest… That innocent and forthright face was free of gloom from any worries, and was too bright for the conflicted Miara.

「... Fine. If you wish so, I will take you on.」

When she realized it, she already said that. She wouldn’t listen no matter what Harrah said, and she walked to the competition grounds with the female knight. Miara asked for a shorter training weapon, then took a stance with a short sword against Lucanti.

「I will let you attack first, do as you wish.」

「A straight up fight then— Haahh!」

Lucanti slashed with a spirited blow. Miara backdashed to evade two blows, then narrowed her eyes.

「What a fierce attack. However— it's crude.」

「!」

Dodging a horizontal slash, she closed in. The female knight jumped to the side and the sword tip glazed her flank. When Lucanti renewed her assault after creating some distance, Miara blocked, grabbed her wrist to pull her in, and sweep the leg at the same time.

「—! Ughh...!」

The female knight didn't resist the attack, rolling forward out of attack range with the momentum. Miara glared sharply at Lucanti who stood up from the roll, pointing her shortsword at her.

「Nice barrel roll. You aren't good with leg attacks?」

「That seems to be the case. I didn't expect it to be this sharp.」

Lucanti said, seemingly moved— After getting hit twice in a row by the opponent, normal people would get on the defensive, but Lucanti wasn't someone who would back down from that. Lucanti believed that her next attack would land, executing a flurry of attacks that started with a lunge— Miara blocked the attack, then sliced at Lucanti's upper arm and shoulder.

「—!」

「That's the third strike… It's a shallow hit, but if we were using real swords, this wouldn't just be a flesh wound.」

She said while repositioning her stance. No blood was shed because they were using wooden swords, but bleeding was an element that decides a match. Blood loss will make one's movements dull, and lose concentration. In a protracted battle, this will add up into an overwhelming advantage.

「Your large movements wear down your endurance drastically… If you still want to continue, it will get even harder.」

Miara only used blocks and counters, minimizing her movements. Lucanti knew that, but still attacked boldly— so Miara fended off the attacks easily and struck at the smallest openings.

There had not been any decisive blows, but the situation was slowly leaning against the female knight. Miara could vent her frustration if her opponents wavers, but Lucanti showed no signs of doing so. She valiantly challenged the fight in search of a victory, which frustrates Miara to no ends, and she said.

「I'm just talking to myself, so feel free to ignore this— my elder brother is a much more accomplished swordsman than me. This kodachi is meant to be wielded with both hands, and he is an excellent dual wielder, stronger than all other disciples who practice the same style… and I take great pride in that.」

「... Dual wielding expert?... That reminds me of Lady Yatori.」

Lucanti pulled away and answered. That name made Miara scowl her face.

「Yes, of course you would— Yatorishino Igsem ended my brother's life by defeating him. I can only imagine how their clash turned out— but the defeat of my skilled brother meant the essence of the Gin clan had been crushed by the Igsem sword. That's what I think.」

Her brother would not lose in a boring fashion. So he must have shown all of his skills and still fell short— her firm trust in her brother let Miara arrive at a conclusion closed to the truth… However, the heavy truth that she lost her brother remained unchanged.

「As a junior disciple, I have to take revenge for the defeat of my senior disciple… However, my capabilities are far weaker than my brother, so challenging Yatorishino Igsem is as good as suicide. I have to live and accomplish my mission, and can't die because of a personal vendetta. But that day will surely come— I use that as an excuse to avoid challenging her.」

After saying that, Miara clashed with Lucanti again. Pieces of the wooden swords broke off and scattered in the air.

「However— while I was putting off my revenge, Yatorishino Igsem died. And she fell to gunshots. Her reputation as the strongest remained untarnished, and she moved to a place beyond me.

… This entire thing… is too sly!」

Miara yelled and took the initiative to attack for the first time— feinting and kicking the female knight's chest, forcing Lucanti to stumble.

「I will be fine. No matter how much I struggle, I won't reach the realm of the strongest. However, my brother— what about the life my brother lived? He lost to an Igsem, and became merely a page in her legend, is that all that my brother amounts to!? Do I have to acknowledge that!?」

Miara knew she was venting her anger, but couldn't hold back. She spilled everything built up in her heart onto the innocent and carefree girl.

I’m the worst.

When Miara was reproaching herself— Lucanti had a smile that was out of place.

「... I’m, envious of your brother...」

「— What did you say?」

Miara glared at her with eyes wide open. The female knight didn’t falter before her dangerous aura and repeated.

「I said I envy him… He fought Yatori in a fair match and ended his life in battle. That’s one of the most noble way to die as a warrior.」

「—! What’s this drivel—!」

Miara attempted to shut her up with a strike, but Lucanti managed to parry it. There was a huge disparity in their endurance now. Miara targeted this moment to feint and win the match with her kicks—

「— however, since you’re betting the pride towards your brother, I won’t lose!」

When Miara lifted her leg to kick, Lucanti shoulder charged with all her might to knock Miara away. Using the short moment before Miara could regain her balance—Lucanti bet everything on one slash.



「Haaaaaahhh!」

「— Ugghh!」

Her footing wasn't firm enough to block the fierce strike from above. She couldn't dodge either or use any techniques. In such a situation, Miara slashed at her opponent's wrist, aiming for at least a double KO. Striking before she was struck was the only way to win. Even if this was a real sword fight, she would make the same choice.

Before the heavy attack landed, both wooden swords stopped short at the same time. The audience watched tensely with bated breath. If this wasn't a friendly match but a real battle, no one could judge who would have won.

「D-Draw...?」

The referee announced unconfidently. When they heard that, both of them collapsed onto the ground. When people relaxed their focus and tension, they would sit down weakly.

Lucanti faced her opponent again to continue her words.

「My elder brother was killed in action during the northern unrest, I heard his throat was cut during a chaotic battle. It was an honorable death in battle— but his demise was less glorious when compared to your brother.」

「......」

「However, my brother proved himself in a different area. Lady Yatori said that my brother followed the Chivalry path better than anyone during the northern unrest. He didn't differentiate between Katjvarna citizens or the Shinnack Tribe, protecting all civilians and even stopping allies from enacting violence towards them. Yatori said that my brother was an unwavering knight until his last moments.」

Lucanti said proudly and looked at the water Sprite Niji she placed on the ground before the battle. She could see the hearty laugh of her late brother Deinkun from the partner Sprite he left behind.

「And the one who performed my brother's last rites was Lady Yatori. He fought valiantly as a knight, protecting the civilians and his comrades until the end, and that lady bore witness to his life. For a knight, this was a noble death of the highest caliber.」

「......」

「A person's demise is determined by their life. However, there are many ways of life. I wished to live as a knight just like my brother, and die as one— What about you, Lady Miara?」

At that question, Miara stood stiffly as if an arrow had pierced her heart.

「—I...」

The answer was clear, but she couldn't say it. Support Jean and lead Kioka towards prosperity — That should be the goal of Miara who values the reputation of her martial clan.

Lucanti looked right at her and smiled calmly.

「There's no shame in having something you value more than honour and duty.」

Her gentle light shone on the inner thoughts that Miara couldn't ignore.

「Everyone is betting their life on something they think is irreplaceable. Be it the glory of a martial clan, the 20 million citizens of the Empire, or a loved one— they all hold equal weight.」

The female knight’s gentle words made Miara reel back. Because she would have to reevaluate her way of life if she accepted this way of thinking.

「Hence, it’s fine for you to be more honest with your feelings.」

Lucanti concluded with a smile, then got up with her wooden sword in hand.

「This has been a meaningful match. I will use this experience to better myself, and hope we will have a chance to battle again.」

After saying that with a salute, she walked towards the Imperial camp. At that moment, Miara’s mind dramatically linked a few facts together. Northern unrest, the mission of the Phantom Unit, the way the female knight’s brother died— all that hinted at one answer.

「— Please wait! Your… what’s the name of the person who killed your brother?」

The woman asked, spurred by a certain premonition. Lucanti stopped and turned part way back at Miara.

「I heard it’s a warrior named Nirva Gin— even so, he didn’t live long enough for me to challenge him, so there’s no way for me to take revenge.」

The female knight smiled awkwardly. She then left without turning back. A tear rolled down Miara’s cheek as she watched her go— *How foolish. Why did I think I’m the only one in such a predicament?*

She didn’t say anything or complain to anyone. The rights to blame herself or lament the unreasonableness of this absurd world— only that woman had that right.

After taking a brief look at the friendly matches, Ikuta returned to the carriage where Chamille was waiting. Similar to Jean, he gave his all to the Trial of God together with the Scientists, and had to perform his duties as a Field Marshal at night— However, he wouldn't use this excuse to shorten the time he spent with Chamille.

「... Ahh～... I didn't notice because of the cool temperature, but I sweated a lot. I will go wipe myself down.」

Ikuta noticed when he was about to sit down in the carriage, and decided to leave. Chamille stopped him in a hurry.

「Wait, Solork. I will wipe you down.」

「Huh?」

「If you go out into the cold, you get sick. And also… I don't know if you remember, but I have done this numerous times before.」

Chamille said and made the youth stay in the carriage… He needed a walking stick to move, so boarding the carriage was quite a pain for him. She didn't want him to exhaust himself over something so trivial.

Ikuta considered the girl's proposal.

「... Well, then, help me wipe my upper body.」

「Yes, leave it to me. Sit on the bed, take off your shirt and relax.」

The relieved girl made the youth sit down, then prepared a basin of hot water and towel. With everything in order, she knelt on the bed, then wiped Ikuta's back, careful not to spill the water.

「...... Ughh...」

With the youth's naked back before her, she felt light headed. She should have gotten used to wiping his body, Chamille thought, but that was only true for the silent Ikuta Solork from back then.

With each wipe, she could feel the youth's body warmth and heart beat through the towel. Her fingers brushed across the old wounds on his skin, reminding her of how he got injured… Some were from the battlefield, while others were from his mischievous childhood days. The scars told his history and way of life. Chamille was on the verge of tears. Just wiping the youth's body made her feelings for him even stronger.

「... I-I'm done. You can get dressed now, Solork.」

「Yes, thank you, I feel refreshed.」

Chamille somehow restrained herself and finished her work, hurrying off the bed with the basin and towel. She didn't know what kind of face she was making, and was afraid of facing the youth.

However— when she turned back carefully after placing the items on the table, Ikuta was already sitting on the bed with a fresh shirt. He was smiling gently with his arms spread apart.

「You can come here now.」

He said simply, urging the girl to come into his arms. Chamille stood stiffly in place for a while. She slowly shuffled over with trembling steps, then leaned onto the youth's shoulder.

Ikuta's arms on her back tightened a little. Unlike his usual embrace, this was a gentle and warm hug. Chamille enjoyed this blissfully with her body and then said.

「... How did you know...?」

「Hmm?」

「How are you able to tell that… When I...」

「When you?」

「... When I want to be hugged tightly...」

The girl asked with a beet red face. This made the youth smile and answered.

「Chamille, actually… You might not know, but when you feel like that, your earlobes will turn red.」

「Ehh—」

The girl believed him and touched her ears in a panic. Ikuta who was right before her stuck out his tongue:

「It’s a lie— The answer is, I have been watching you seriously. I know at least this much about you.」

He revealed the real answer. Chamille wailed when she heard that一so he knew. She finally got a clear answer that cleared the vague unease in her heart.

Ikuta saw through everything. He already knew how she really felt about him, he knew about her murky emotions of longing and lust, she was completely exposed.

Be it a gentle embrace like this or something more intense from time to time— the youth would give the girl what she thirsted for when she was at her limit. The girl would never tell him what she wanted, so the youth would grant her wishes during such times. He would be like a father at times, like a brother times, and a lover at times.

「However, there would be times when I miss the moment by accident. I will be happy if you can just tell me what you want.」

Ikuta added, as if to deal the final blow to the girl. 「You don't have to hold it in. If there is something you want me to do, then don't hold back and ask for it.」 The youth told her that he would not refuse any of her requests. The only thing he wouldn't forgive was the girl's attempt to hurt herself.

「Phew～ It feels a little warm. Should we call it a day?」

After Ikuta exposed the secrets of the girl's heart, he said cheekily. He slowly relaxed the strength of his embrace. At that moment— Chamille hugged him back with all her might, as if she didn't have enough. For the first time in two years, she acted wilfully.

「... Just a while longer...」

「Well said.」

Ikuta patted the girl's head with a smile— without any anxiety on his face, he waited for the girl to open her heart.

「— Ahhh～～ I have finally finished～!」

Vackie's liberated voice reverberated in the tent. Aside from the investigations during the day, she had to perform her admin officer duty, write a report together with her colleagues, and finish up forms and documents before calling it a day.

「Good work everyone! Alright～ let's find Chamille～」

「—? H-Hey! Wait!」

When the girl in a white coat was about to turn and leave, the youth with a monocle stopped her in a hurry. Vackie turned to him confusedly.

「? What's the matter, Yoyo?」

「Isn’t it obvious, you met Her Majesty several times in the day already! You are too thick faced when speaking with the Empress, but at least let her and Ikuta rest at night!」

Yorga reminded her with common sense. Vackie paused momentarily and understood his worries.

「Oh… You are right. If I go now, I might run into an awkward moment. Thank you for reminding me, Yoyo. I’m too careless.」

Vackie knocked the side of her own head. Realizing that she couldn’t meet with her friend made the girl depressed.

「Which means~ I have to sleep without hugging Her Majesty today… how lonely… how sad...」

「Bear with it. We have to investigate tomorrow too, so there’s plenty of people you can speak with.」

「I have chatted enough with the Scientists during the day. I really want to chat with a girl I’m close with right now! I~ really~ want~ to 」

The girl’s whim was unanswered, which made her swing her limbs around. Unwilling to trouble the other admin officers, Yorga brought her out of the tent. He walked with her in the camp as he soothed Vackie. Suddenly, the girl seemed to realize something.

「I know, let’s find Lulu! She said she don’t have escort duty tonight! 」

「I will stop you with all my might. It’s too cruel for her to accompany you even on her day off.」

「Meanie—!」

Vackie reacted intensely when her idea was sealed off right away. Yorga patiently placated her, and shortly after, the large carriage used by the Empress came into view.

「Ughh～ I'm jealous… Chamille and Ikuta-nii must be hugging tightly right now… and getting all hot and bothered...」

「I told you not to have such crude thoughts… But will that actually happen?」

Yorga said softly as they stopped and looked at the large carriage.

「I have taken up this post at the palace for some time now, and I still don't understand their relationship. They are like parent and child, siblings, and lovers… But I can feel something that doesn't belong to all of those categories too.」

When she heard his impression, Vackie pondered with a finger on her lips.

「Hmm～... I think the correct answer is all of the above.」

「Huh?」

「Like I said, I think Ikuta-nii is playing all these roles. Be it a father, brother or lover— he is providing Chamille with everything she needs.」

This unexpected answer made Yorga open his eyes wide. Vackie turned to him and continued in a serious tone.

「I'm going to tell you an obvious fact— Chamille likes Ikuta-nii. And not the normal variety, but hopelessly in love. Both her body and soul yearn for Ikuta-nii, she is so thirsty that it can't be described with words. Her longing, admiration, love, guilt, and everything else, she hopes that Ikuta-nii will answer all of that.」

Vackie's forthright nature allowed her to speak things that others would hesitate to say. As the youth was backing away from that intensity, the girl sighed melancholically.

「Going off topic for a while– Chamille has a very small circle of friends. She has almost no friends that can treat her like an equal, or someone who can listen to her like a family. She only has vassals who keep their distance out of fear. This made the position of Empress very lonely. And of course, there are exceptions like me and the members of the 『Knights Corp』, but not to the extent that she can tell us everything without any hesitation.」

Yorga nodded with a complicated face. During the days in the palace, he realized how difficult it was to get close to the Empress' heart.

「In this situation, only Ikuta-nii can accompany Chamille's heart. I think they have the reason to be so intimate. However… This is still a miracle. As long as she remains an Empress, it will be difficult to get her to open her heart to others.」

Vackie stated the cruel fact, and turned her gaze back to the large carriage.

「And the most difficult thing is, Chamille still needs to make a lot of connections. She wasn't given parents who would be concerned about her, friends to chat and quarrel with, or a lover to accept her and embrace her. But Chamille needs all that. The Empress of a nation heading towards its demise isn't an easy job that can be shouldered without these support.」

Yorga nodded with a bitter face and imagined how heavy the burden was placed on Chamille. A girl in her teens has to shoulder the fate of 20 million citizens. That was very abnormal.

「And so, Ikuta-nii took on all these roles. A father, a friend, a lover— he can't even afford to pick only one role.

As for the role of a friend, he is sharing part of that with me, a new comer… But that isn't enough to make her relax. However, this isn't something that needs to be addressed right away. We just have to spend more time to increase the number of people Chamille can open her heart to, and spread out the people she can rely on. Before that, Ikuta-nii has to shoulder it all for now.」

Sigh… the girl's words also hinted at her self reproach for being useless.

「... And making things more difficult, even though Chamille yearns for it, she can't ask Ikuta-nii to help her...」

「— Is that so?」

「Yes… There is a brake in her heart, and the source is Yatori-san who she mentions from time to time… Well～ I also did some research and know what kind of person she was, but the more I investigate, the more absurd I find it… This might sound rude, but is she a real person? She feels more like a fictional myth...?」

Vackie said with a dry smile, and Yorga concurred in his mind. There were times when he almost encountered her, so he got curious about Yatorishino Igsem. After investigating that woman, his thoughts were similar to the girl beside him.

「In any case, Chamille harbours guilt towards that Yatori-san, and falls into a contradiction where she couldn't approach Ikuta-nii even though she wants to… However, that was like warning herself not to drink water even though she was thirsty. Humans have to drink water to survive. That's how much Chamille craves for Ikuta-nii.」

Vackie said with conviction, and groaned because of the frustration in her chest that she couldn't vent out.

「— Speaking of which, Chamille is in her puberty, and her body will react when she is with someone she really likes. That's only natural, but Ikuta-nii has to be the one to take action instead. He has to notice what she needs, and can't ignore her. Even if he didn't push her down and get it on, he still needs to show his manly side.」

「Then what should Ikuta do… No, how is he handling it?」

The worried Yorga couldn't help asking. Vackie rested her chin on her hand and thought about how those two were.

「At least for now, they have not reached that stage. If it did, you can tell from the air about them… So I'm guessing more physical contact than normal, and some close calls to soothe Chamille's feelings? I'm just imagining it, but Ikuta-nii should be quite adept at this.」

There was proof that he was dealing with it properly, since Chamille's mood had been stable— the girl added. Her analysis made Yorga grab his head.

「... Their relationship sounds really twisted.」

「That might be so, but no one can blame them.」

Vackie said conclusively. He knew that very well, but the youth still continued:

「... What about the Empress' feelings of love? Ikuta cares for her, but not as a woman. No matter how many times they get intimate, her feelings will remain one sided.」

「It’s troubling. This is my personal view— I think in Ikuta-nii’s mind, there is no difference between familial love and the love between a man and a woman. That might seem broad minded, but also as if his feelings had not developed since childhood. Maybe a bit of both. It’s understandable given the environment he grew up in.」

「... What about Yatorishino Igsem? The Empress feels guilty about being with Ikuta without Yatorishino, right?」

「I think most of her guilty feeling is Chamille’s own imagination. Because if Yatori-san was the same as the person I researched, she would never demand Chamille to stay away from Ikuta-nii for her sake. Because she blames herself too much, she couldn’t accept Yatori-san’s last will properly. Ikuta-nii needs to correct this. Since Chamille can’t crave for him, Ikuta-nii has to take the initiative to touch her.」

Vackie’s words were so bold that Yorga was dumbstruck— Simply put, for Vackie, the last will of the dead wasn’t the problem. She had no way of knowing what the late Yatorishino Igsem thought, since she couldn’t communicate with her. So she interpreted things in a way that benefits Chamille. She was unscrupulous in her ways to save her friend who was still alive— be it good or bad, this was how Vackie showed her friendship.

「...Ikuta is a man too, will he lose himself during the process...」

「Huh, that’s what you are worried about? Afraid the incredibly experienced Ikuta-nii who prefers MILFs will lose his restraints? It should be the opposite, right? He might cause a problem from restraining himself too much?」

「......」

That was one way of looking at it. Casting a sideway glance at the troubled Yorga, the white coat girl looked up at the night sky.

「Sigh, even with that in mind, this is just a slightly lewd service, and he is just a nanny. Ikuta-nii is the type that wants intercourse as an extension of intimate contact without harbouring any special feelings. I think he treats sex as one method of soothing a patient's pain. That's how it feels when during that period when he was womanizing very hard.」

「......」

「If it's someone he really likes, he will use a different method to create bonds. If that person was Yatori-san— I think it would be better for Chamille to change her attitude earlier. Since their fondness is in different realms. This might sound bad, but she has no chance even with the feelings of guilt.」

Her conclusion was clear and cruel to a fault. The monocle youth sighed heavily, and Vackie smiled at him mischievously.

「... Your feelings are complicated, right? It must feels that way to someone who can't hold back and laid his hands on me.」

The youth stiffened, then looked at the girl with a complicated expression of self reproach and sadness. He didn't say anything as Vackie hugged him tight.

「I'm saying this because I'm like that— for people who spent their childhood devoid of love, they will greedily crave for love when they grow up. When we grow close enough, even when I hug her shamelessly, Chamille doesn't really hate it, right? That's one such reaction… The comfortable feeling of being hugged tightly should be experienced frequently when we are young.」

「......」

「Sometimes, I want someone to gently pat my head, or embrace me tightly. During lonely nights, such contacts aren't enough at all— if we want that child to achieve happiness, we need to satisfy her first. Before teaching and guiding her, we have to make her happy.」

The girl declared and rubbed her cheeks on the youth's chest. Feeling his heart from so close, she stated her demands.

「People whose needs are satisfied can change. So, Yorga— hold me?」

The youth didn't have the option of objecting. He closed his arms around the girl's back, holding her tight with his skinny arms. Vackie closed her eyes happily and muttered.

「— That's right, I don't want to lose this feeling. Because the world without this warmth is so, so cold...」

As if she was trying to escape her memories of the coldness, the girl basked in the youth's warmth greedily— and the two of them leaned onto each other for a very long time.

The Scientists could solve one riddle in one day, and even manage two if time permits. But as time went on, it couldn't be solved so easily anymore. It wasn't just the difficulty level, the questions branched out to geology and biology. A lot of time was also needed to gather data, so manpower became a problem.

That might be so, but for the group who studied natural science which had a fickle nature, this was just par for the course. No one complained as the white coated intellects passionately challenged the puzzles. However—

「......」

「......」

Ignoring all that for now. This situation was unexpected for both the dark-haired youth and white-haired officer.

「... The pace is slow.」

「... Do I look like I can go faster?」

Grumbles could be heard every now and then. The healthy Jean and Ikuta with a walking stick had different walking speeds. Both of them had a section with them for the first stage of solving this puzzle—gathering the necessary data.

「*...Ham**
... Why are you here?」

「How would I know. Go ask Professor Anarai.」

Ikuta snorted and answered, and recalled the events that led to this.

「— From the looks of things, we have search for a clue around this place.」

When he realized the Sprites were pointing towards the forested hills, Anarai gathered the Scientists to plan their next course of action. So far, the questions were asked in an open area, so this was the first time this happened.

「For the last few questions, the Sprites' reaction is getting more complicated. Should we go directly to collect the data, instead of leaving it to the soldiers?」

Yorga raised his hand to give his opinion. If it's just running around with their partner Sprite, the soldiers could do that too, but a Scientist's mind is needed to explain the Sprite's reaction. No one objected, and Anarai nodded.

「True. To make the search more efficient, let's split into pairs. First up— Nazuna, you are with Bajin.」

「Got it. Don't mess up this time, Bajin.」

「I-I will do my best.」

Starting with this experienced couple, the Scientists in the tent swiftly paired up. Yorga was naturally paired with Vackie, and the pairing assigned by Anarai seems logical to everyone.

「... That's twelve pairs. It's just Jean and Ikuta left.」

But that's only until this moment. When the two youths realized that they were the only ones left, they were dumbfounded.

「... Please wait.」 「Professor, could it be—」

「That's right. You two will team up and head to the assigned zone. You can bring escorts with you, but Ikuta has to walk by himself, and Jean has to match his pace. Do not act alone.」

The swift commands stopped any objections. They still wanted to protest, but the old sage added with finality:

「By the way, if you violate my orders, I will bar you from future investigations— that's all I have to say.」

「... I messed up. I forgot that Professor Anarai can be more reckless than dad at times...」

The dark-haired youth held his head and said to himself. The white-haired officer walked ahead of him and snorted.

「What an unfathomable instruction. Teaming up with you will only lower my efficiency.」

He said as he glanced at Ikuta. The soldiers would help when the road was uneven, but Ikuta continued at a relatively constant pace.

「...」

Turning his gaze ahead, Jean thought back about something that happened on the way here.

「— Sorry Sir, can you repeat that order?」

In the carriage with just two people, Jean asked in a trembling voice. His adoptive father said again smoothly.

「Go Invite Ikuta Solork to join us personally. I'm sure I said that.」

The white-haired officer faced this unbelievable fact again. His mind was a mess as he desperately tried to probe what his father was thinking.

「... This… First, what's the reason? Next, what's the motive? And finally, why me?」

「The reason is, him joining us will make things convenient for us. The same with the motive. I'm leaving it to you because you are a suitable choice— because the two of you have many things in common.」

The youth was at a loss for words. Ario watched his reaction with a smile and continued:

「Both of you are young, high ranking generals, and disciples of the same Scientist. Just those common points can make you two feel close. And with the number of times you two battle, you can figure out each other's personalities, right? You two even wrestled that one time.」

Ughh, Jean couldn't refute him. That scuffle was a serious mistake, and he couldn't refuse when the Prime Minister pointed that out. The order was hinting at him using this chance to redeem himself, so Jean couldn't refuse.

「Field Marshal Solork— his personality isn't as twisted as he looks, or rather, he is very forthright and pure. Jean, he really resembles you. To me, he is someone I have to figure out— regrettably, he is very guarded against me, so nothing I say can move him.」

「......」

「So I'm leaving this to you, Jean. Only a sincere persuasion without logic or schemes can reach him. There is no use with all your gimmicks, just tell him your hopes for the future of Kioka. Just tell him your experience that led to you having this aspiration.」

The man asked him to have a heart to heart talk with his nemesis, the Field Marshal from an enemy nation. When Jean was clenching his fists with a strong urge to refuse, Ario added:

「This isn't an invitation forced reluctantly from our defeat, I think this has a good chance of working. Because in the end— he likes people like you.」

「...!... You are asking too much from me, Sir.」

Jean shook his head as he thought back— this might be his adoptive father's orders, but there were things he could do and couldn't do. He made up his mind to focus on the investigation before him.

「... We circled the area, but the Sprites showed no reaction. Let's search the higher grounds.」

「Sorry, but I need to take a break here before continuing.」

「*Whia**
?」

「My feet hurts. I can force myself to walk, but it will be bad if this worsens. For the sake of the future, it will be wise to rest here for now.」

Ikuta sat down on a boulder nearby. Jean thought about ignoring him and going on ahead, but he remembered what Anarai said— *do not act alone.*
I*f you violate my orders, I will bar you from future investigations*
—

「...... Damn it!」

Jean stopped with a bitter face— he was evenly matched with him in terms of investigation results, so he couldn't afford to be barred from the investigations. That meant giving the Empire the upper hand in diplomatic affairs.

「By the way, when did you hurt your leg? You were still lively when I saw you at the Hierdo mines.」

「The way you talk hasn't changed since then. And unfortunately, your face is the same too—」

Ikuta who was about to respond with sarcasm suddenly stopped— The sunlight shining through the gaps of the trees illuminated Jean Arkinex's profile, and his face had lost it's liveliness, looking as frail as an old man.

「— No, you have aged a lot?」

The dark-haired youth said as he rubbed his eyes. When Jean turned towards him with furrowed brows, that face had reverted to normal.

However— maybe it was the scene he saw for a moment which affected him, there seemed to be a shadow over Jean's face.

「... What are you saying? I didn't change, my subordinates said so too.」

Jean said puzzledly. Ikuta shook his head with a sigh.

「... That's good then. By the way, you haven't slept in a long time, right? So, when did your insomnia start?」

「I have no reason to tell you that.」

「I got hit by a ricochet in the civil war two years ago.」

「?」

「That's the time and reason behind my leg injury. See, I answered your question.」

Ikuta said preemptively. Since that was what Jean asked, Jean had to answer too. After scowling his mouth and thinking for a while, he said quietly:

「... Since I was 15..」

「So more than ten years? You sure pushed staying up late to the limits.」

Ikuta expressed his thoughts expressionlessly. The white-haired officer shook his head.

「No— I think it's too short… That's more than a third of my active days. I don't think my performance is worthy of the time spent.」

He wasn’t being humble, that was his sincere thoughts. Compared to his ideals, the time he had was too short. He was wasting too much time, and the frustration made Jean glare at Ikuta.

「And you are responsible for wasting a lot of it… Your pain should have subsided, right?」

「Yeah, yeah, let’s go.」

Ikuta got up with a sigh. Seeing that break time was over, the soldiers got ready and moved along the hilly path.

At the same time, at the foot of the hill, the Empress was standing in the plains and waiting for their return.

「— Want some tea, Chamille?」

Anarai walked over with a steaming cup of tea and offered it to the girl.

「The weather is cold here, unlike the Empire. I will catch a cold if I just stand here.」

Chamille accepted his offer and took a sip. The tea with quite a bit of sugar was sweet and warm, heating up her chilled body.

「......Professor Anarai.」

「Hmm?」

「... Why did you pair Solork and Major General Arkinex up?」

Chamille asked something that everyone was thinking about. Anarai groaned and said:

「Hey～Chamille. What do you think is the opposite of goodwill?」

「— Huh?」

Getting a question in response to her question made the Empress stare with her eyes wide open. Anarai immediately continued:

「It’s apathy. There are many emotions that will hinder friendship and love, and the biggest problem is apathy. People won’t be happy being with people they are not interested in— they will use this instinct to choose the people they associate with.」

Chamille nodded in concurment. Anarai looked at the hill before them with a grin.

「But, don’t you think the interaction between Ikuta and Jean is far from apathy?」

「——」

「It is interesting to observe them, right? They aren’t the type to get into meaningless quarrels, being magnanimous enough to laugh off taunts. They are usually calm, but get all worked up when they see each other, eager to get at each other’s throats.」

The old sage said cheerfully, moving his clenched fists together.

「I call such clashes, personality chemical reactions. This is a Scientific term, referring to the reaction when two different materials get into contact. Some materials will melt together like glue, some will turn stiff, and others will burn intensely. Isn’t the last example the most apt description for them?」

「... Intense burning on contact… Yes, that’s true.」

「There are all sorts of reactions— and there are all sorts of phenomena when two materials bond together. Just like how it’s boring to talk to someone you are not interested in, materials that won’t bond won’t have any reaction. Conversely, having a reaction

means there is a chance of bonding. When two different material bond together, there is a chance of a new material will be created.」

The old sage said excitedly, his interest for the unknown was clear from his eyes.

「I want to see the result of their chemical reaction— that's the reason I paired Ikuta with Jean. No, there isn't any need for a reason in the first place. After all, they are colleagues invested in the same research in the first place.」

His cheery tone stopped here as Anarai looked up into the sky.

「But when I speak about this topic, it reminds me of a memory. When we and Bada were still with the Rising Sun Regiment, the young Ikuta met Yatori who came on a study trip.」

「......!」

「Their reaction was very dramatic. They met, got in contact, and learned about each other— when I realized it, they were bonded more closely than a married couple or siblings. Something so tightly bound is just like an alloy. It's the creation of a metal that is stronger, tougher, and more enduring than everything else.」

The old sage's words made Chamille scream in her heart. While she was trying to hide that, Anarai continued nostalgically.

「And of course, that alloy still remains. Material that reached a balance in chemical reaction won't break down easily. Even more so for Ikuta and Yatori— no matter how hot a furnace is, their bonds will never break. The two of them will continue to exist as one from now on too.」

Anarai paused, then said.

「So, Chamille. If Ikuta loves you— that means Yatori loves you too. 」

「!」

The girl opened her eyes wide. Anarai was still watching the distant sky as he said:

「I can't tell you much. However, just don't forget what I just told you, alright? Can you make the right call and accept her true feelings?」

Their conversation ended here. The old sage left shortly after, but his words lingered in Chamille's heart.

It was already evening and about time to consider retreating, when the two people in the hills made some progress.

「...! The Sprites are reacting! As expected, it's ahead of us!」

Jean, who was standing on a slope, shouted with his partner Sprite in hand. He was about to climb further when Ikuta stopped him.

「Hey, wait. I know you want to get to the top to grasp the terrain, but it's too foolhardy to bash through the foliage. If we make a detour there, the visibility and road condition will be better.」

「You want to waste time over mere foliage? If you are afraid of the road conditions, just follow the path I take. I will clear the bushes, so you should be able to keep up.」

「... Alright then. You sure are hasty.」

Ikuta showed a look of resignation as he followed the white-haired officer with the rest of the troops. Jean cleared the bushes with large movements and swiftly climbed up the slope.

「...! The bushes are denser than I imagine! Solork, are you keeping up!」

「I am! A certain guy's back is just that conspicuous!」

「*Hah**

, good! It's great that I'm leading the way! If it's the reverse, I will miss my footing because I don't want to see your back!」

The two of them mocked each other as they advanced, when a cliff suddenly appeared before Jean. He clicked his tongue and looked around him.

「We can't climb this… go around from the left! Keep up!」

「... Oh, got it...!」

Jean was forced to struggle with the vegetation blocking his way as he moved sideways along the slope. As he was clearing the bushes, Ikuta reached behind Jean. His footing was unsteady since the soldiers weren't supporting him.

「... The terrain is bad, Solork. Watch your steps—」

「— Whoa?」

Jean didn't even finish when Ikuta cut him off with a yell. The white-haired officer could see the dark-haired youth falling towards the woods.

「Solork!」

Jean quickly grabbed his arm, but the weight was heavier than he expected. Ikuta lost his footing and was falling into an opening hidden by the vegetation.

「Ughh—」 「—!」

Losing his balance and the poor terrain. Even the white-haired officer couldn't overcome these two factors to hold back a person's body weight— Before the soldiers could assist, both of them tumbled down the hill.

「... Hey, still alive?」

「... Obviously.」

Their voices echoed in the dark cave. After confirming that they were both there, they checked for injuries before sitting up— There were scratches, but fortunately, no serious bleeding.

Their partners quickly shone with Lantern light, illuminating the surrounding terrain— as expected, this was the bottom of a pit surrounded by cliffs and dirt walls. Light could be seen from the hole above, but it was quite far away.

「... Luckily, the slope turned less steep midway, but we still rolled really far away. It's about ten metres to the hole.」

「...*Mum*
*. Instead of the space between two boulders, this is closer to a cave like hole here.」

Jean looked up at the hole they fell in from. They could hear the voices of the soldiers from above, but there weren't any signs of rescue for the time being. The reason was clear. There was too big a height difference from the entrance to the bottom, so they wouldn't be able to get up if they fell down.

They yelled to inform their men that they were fine for now, then analyzed the situation they were in.

「... It would be difficult to climb up ourselves. They just need to lower down a rope, however—」

「...Unfortunately, my escorts didn't bring such equipment either. Their bags are full of measurement tools, and there didn't seem to be any need to scale a mountain. I only have these tools on me.」

Ikuta pointed to a small rucksack. Jean frowned bitterly while Ikuta added:

「And worse of all— when I was rolling down the hole, I hit my leg against a rock and probably can't move for a few hours.」

Ikuta used the pain he felt as a diagnosis. Jean stroked his chin in deep thought.

「... So in summary, what's the current situation?」

「We can't do anything without ropes, so we should send our men down hill to request for aid. If they set off now, the sun would have set when they reach the foot of the hill. It will be too risky for them to come back in the dark, so help will only be here tomorrow morning.」

The dark-haired youth shrugged with his back on the cliff. The white-haired officer scowled his face bitterly.

「... How shameful.」

「There are times when life hits you hard— You will have to wait leisurely until morning.」

Ikuta laughed sarcastically. Jean tried searching for a way to escape for some time— but his efforts turned up empty, so he sat down again with a heavy sigh.

Two hours later. The sun set, and the slither of light from the entrance disappeared.

「— Heave!」

Ikuta caught a lizard by its tail, and smashed it hard against the boulder. After confirming that the lizard was dead, he skewered it just like a grilled fish. Jean furrowed his brows at that.

「... You are going to eat that?」

「? Lizard is a hearty meal. It's not a hard choice to make.」

Ikuta answered and started grilling the lizard on the flame given out by a Fire Sprite— The troops at the hole entrance wrapped one water, fire and wind Sprite in a cloth and lowered them into the hole, so they could have an easier time through the night. They could have asked the troops to leave their rations behind, but the two generals didn't want the soldiers to starve and foraged for their own food.

「... You have the capabilities to be a Field Marshal, and the wits to debate the Scientists, but you are treating a lizard as a hearty meal? ...It might be a little late to ask, but how did you grow up?」

Jean asked with a confounded face. Ikuta inclined his head in deep thought.

「... There are vast differences depending on the timing, so it's hard to explain. I'm the son of a Regimental Commander, so I learned military tactics, and there are Scientists around me, so I learned how to use my brain… After that, I spent some time having trouble just getting meals, and ate everything I could find. That's all.」

「... You are omitting too much. Can't you give more details?」

「That's fine, but what's with your haughty attitude?」

He was a little angry, but this wasn't a bad way to kill time. Ikuta used the well grilled lizard as a side dish as he described his experiences.

He was born in a unique regiment, spent his days with Scientists, and met with a vermillion-haired girl who was visiting. He was on the run after his father got imprisoned, and his mother died before him. How he entered high school from the orphanage and reunited with her in school. He had no intentions of participating in the Officer Cadet Academy, but he met with the members of the 「Knights Corp」,

and was commissioned as an officer for saving the Third Princess. He started his days in battles after that—

After listening to his experiences— Jean caught a lizard he saw from the corner of his eye, and smashed it on a rock. Ikuta yelped in surprise:

「What, you going to eat too?」

「If we are going to spend the night here, it will be a problem if I get frail for the trip back.」

Jean skewered the lizard with a branch, then grilled it with a Fire Sprite. After a brief silence, he said quietly.

「...... This is my fault.」

「Hmm?」

「The reason we fell into this pit. I was too hasty, and chose a route that's too tough for you. I messed up, and I apologize.」

The sudden apology made the dark-haired youth stare with his eyes wide open. However, he shook his head with a wry smile after looking at Jean's poker face.

「... I didn't know the terrain would change so drastically and was overconfident in my leg's condition. I'm at fault too. Sigh, objectively speaking, we are equally at fault.」

If either of them had kept their composure, it wouldn't have come to this. Ikuta was too stubborn and competitive. He also realized that he couldn't move as freely as he did in the past— He had persisted in physiotherapy, but how much mobility could he recover?

While Ikuta was thinking about that, Jean had grilled the lizard and bit its head heartily. The bold manner of eating ran contrary to the impression he gave off, and Ikuta couldn't help saying.

「The scales are rather tough, you know.」

「This is nothing… I have experienced foot shortages too.」

Jean answered as he crunched the bones and scales. He swallowed after chewing thoroughly— then braced himself mentally before saying:

「I was a slave in Laos.」

It was well known that Bayoshie and Laos were hostile to each other, and the war between them was a norm, and was a source of trouble for Kioka at some time. The conflict started 300 years ago over a silver mine at their borders— but no one could confirm the truth, and only their hostile relationship persisted all this time.

Let's ally with one of them and destroy the other— many politicians in Kioka thought this way, but there was a reason why they didn't put this into action. At that time, both Bayoshie and Laos expressed their intention to merge with Kioka, and Kioka accepted both nations. Which means, they were Kioka territory at that time. However— Bayoshie and Laos had brought over their feud along with them.

Since they were fellow citizens, Kioka who upheld the ideology of coexistence between all races couldn't destroy one side. If they did something like that, it would affect the unity of the races that were already flimsy. The only choice was to resolve their feud, but they tried everything from persuasion to sanctions, but Bayoshie and Laos were adamant in their refusal. *We might be a part of the Kioka Republic, but I won't recognize them as an ally*
— that was the stance of the two nations.

They were adamant on this political stance that had an adverse effect on each other, so Bayoshie and Laos were losing their national power. Because of the frequent battles and the seizing of each other's territory and citizens, this was a natural result. Kioka provided aid to the weakening nations, but stopped after realizing that was just pouring oil onto the fire. 「If you don't want to destroy each other, then stop the war」 — Kioka expressed this opinion. However, the two nations, especially Laos, interpreted it differently. 「If you don't want to destroy each other, then hurry up and destroy Bayoshie」, they interpreted Kioka's opinion as such.

Jean Arkinex was borned in a city to Bayoshie's northwest under such a situation.

The southern border that turned into a battlefield was in terrible shape, but he was born in a place physically far from the frontlines. Their declining national power meant the standard of living was worse than a century ago, but Jean who was born in a wealthy family was blissfully unaware of this in his childhood.

For better or worse, his parents were conservative patriots, and had no intention of doing anything about the deteriorating relations with Laos. They called the people who fled to Kioka 'Ingrates', and watched them with scorn. Jean grew up thinking the same way. He was too young to doubt his parent's words.

Jean's intelligence was starting to show then, and his happy parents hired teachers for him. He had a lively personality, and was showered with love and went through high quality education— In the winter when he was twelve, a decisive event happened.

On that day, the five people living under one roof gathered around a peaceful dining table.

「—Hubby, listen. Jean is learning very fast, and the teacher had nothing left to teach him.」

The mother said with a spoon by her mouth, looking troubled and proud at the same time. She was overjoyed by her son's outstanding talents, but that was also a source of worry.

「Really? —Jean is amazing, your intelligence always amazes me.」

The father felt the same way and concurred. He patted his son's light brown hair. Jean was happy that his father praised him, and also felt guilty for troubling his parents.

「However, that's the third one. I don't know if there is a better teacher in the city. Even if we found someone, this child would learn everything in no time...」

The father smiled wryly. This wasn't the first time Jean put a homeschool teacher out of work. The salary of the teacher that increased with their standards also troubled his parents, but not having anyone to hire was also a surprise. Their son was only twelve.

「... Young master is amazing...」

The maid stood by the table to serve him a new bowl of soup and added quietly. Jean scratched his cheek bashfully, and his elder sister beside him raised her voice.

「Father, your thinking is too outdated. Someone as smart as Jean can study in a more amazing place.」

「You mean… the academy in the capital? Jean is smart enough to skip grades… But the budget for the academy has been cut, and I haven't heard any good news from them.」

The father said with his arms crossed… the sister shook her head with a sigh.

「That's too conservative. If it's the capital, then Jean shouldn't go to Bayoshie's capital, but Kioka's Capital, Norandot! That's the only place for him!」

The sister stated a place no one else thought of. The father was stunned, then objected in a panic.

「You want him to leave Bayoshie? No way! How can the eldest son...!」

「Because it's necessary! Not many people know yet, but the senate had accepted the plan to merge with Kioka, so this place will be the Kioka Republic in the future too. So it's not leaving Bayoshie. It's only natural for the capable ones to go to Central. I heard the academic levels are way above this place, so if we want Jean's talent to shine, he should go to Norandot!」

The elder sister got up from her chair and went around to her brother's back to hug his shoulders. She had an intense and exaggerated way of expressing her love. Their father held his head with a sigh.

「You got influenced after hanging out with your weird friends… Enough already. What can he learn by going to a place that speaks a different language?」

「Oh, don't you know, father? Jean can already speak the common Kioka language. Even the home school teacher was dumbstruck by how quickly he learned.」

Really? The father was shocked when he heard that. Jean realized the topic had turned in a strange direction, and asked the mother sitting opposite him.

「... Mother, you want to send me to Kioka?」

「Of course not! I don’t know what you would want when you grow up, but I will be very worried if you go there now. We don’t have any friends in Norandot, so what would your livelihood be like over there?」

「It’s fine if a guardian accompanies him! Well, with father’s connection, that will be easy to arrange, right? Lots of people will ask to be Jean’s guardian!」

「Like I said—」

The sister pressed the issue and the father rebuked timidly. When Jean continued eating as he watched the usual family scene, knocking came from the door. He put down his cutleries and stood up.

「Someone’s here, I will get it!」

Answering the door is my duty. The youth thought with the sense of responsibility of a child, running to the door without needing to be told. Hmm? His eyes opened wide when he reached the door. Without him welcoming them, several adults in thick coats were standing there.

「?Ehh～ Who might you be?」

Did we forget to lock the door? —Jean thought carefreely and asked. His life was too peaceful back then, and didn’t have any sense of danger towards the situation before him. Even though the broken lock was right behind those men, the youth who wasn’t aware of the malice of humans didn’t notice.

「... Start from here?」

「Yes, begin.」

They conversed in a language Jean didn't know, one of the men grabbed him by the collar. Ignoring the surprised youth, the group barged right into the house. When the door was kicked open, the other family members stood up, realizing something was wrong.

「W-What are you doing? Barging into my home—」

The father wanted to admonish them, but one of the intruders said in broken Bayoshie:

「No move!」

He pulled out a dagger and braced it against Jean's neck. The peaceful atmosphere froze. The group looked at the father, mother, sister— when they saw the maid, they changed to Laos and said:

「From your looks— a fellow kin. Come here.」

「Huh, ahh, ahh—」

「What are you doing! Get over here!」

A man grabbed the wrist of the confused maid and dragged her away. When she was gone, the men turned to Jean and the others again. They took out ropes and tossed it to their feet.

「We are taking you away, use the rope to tie each other up. If you refuse— there will be one less member in your family.」

He pushed the dagger against Jean's neck a little, and he started to bleed. His mother screamed.

「D-Damn you...!」 「Father, wait!」

The sister was the calmest, acknowledging the situation and taking action. She stopped her furious father, went behind her parents and whispered— if we don't obey, they will kill us all.

「... Ugh...!」

Her father froze when he heard that, and the sister bound his wrists with the rope— Her swift reaction saved her brother's life. Because if they resisted, those men would kill Jean, the child with no negligible value as a labourer, to set an example.

「Clever girl. Alright— if you don't want to die, then move!」

The man shouted happily when he saw how obedient his prey were. Jean looked at his family in shock. Be it the pain from the dagger at his neck or the malice he harboured towards others for the first time— he wasn't even aware of it, much less accepted it.

They were in a city far from the frontlines, and would normally be safe from such attacks. But in the neighbouring Kioka territory, a part of the former Mamulan tribal zone ignored the political direction of Kioka, and worked illegally with the Laos army, resulting in this situation. With the promise of getting a part of the Bayoshie territory after the attack, they brought the Laos army to northwest Bayoshie, where the security was the weakest.

Because of its vast lands, the Kioka Republic would sometimes lose control of its citizens, especially the former Mamulan tribes which had strong individual tendencies. If it was the Mamulan of the past, Bayoshie wouldn't have let down its guard. Ironically, their complacency after Kioka took over led to this tragedy. In the towns that were attacked, the citizens who resisted were killed, and the rest captured— and most of them were brought to the place they feared the most.

Laos' slave farm. As the name implies, this was the place where slaves from Bayoshie were pushed into forced labour, and was an official government-operated facility. As the war got drawn out, the death of the soldiers resulted in an overall deterioration in the national work force. To make up for this gap, Laos developed and enlarged their slavery system— and now, slaves were the basis of the Laos economy.

「Alright, get to your post! Don't think you can get off easy! If someone slacks off, the entire group will get punished!」

The slaves were initially divided into two types. The first is being bought by normal people at the slave market. This is the most common kind, and the treatment of the slaves differed depending on the environment. Most would be sent to harsh manual labour, but those with good looks or special abilities might get privileged treatment, by their masters or chief craftsman. They were still slaves, but if they worked properly, their livelihood were more or less guaranteed.

And the other type was the worst for Bayoshie citizens, which was where Jean's group was sent, the slave farm. The slaves here were fated to face four things— crude clothing, minimal food, harsh labour and living quarters. This facility was run by the Laos army, known for their rough treatments of prisoners, and the same goes for the slaves.

「Ughh...!」

「Jean, don't push yourself! I will carry that!」

The labour load wasn't lightened for the children. More importantly— Unlike the slaves bought from the market, the soldiers didn't care for the slaves. A normal buyer wouldn't want the slave they bought to die, but the soldiers were only managing the slaves as

a part of their job. The slaves weren't their property, and they wouldn't lose anything if the slaves were worked to death. This worsened their abuse of the slaves— they were treated like expendable items destined to die from overwork.

Jean who was not fully developed couldn't endure the labour that was harsh even for the adults. Before a year had passed, he had grown frail, and his kin had to shoulder his share of the load.

「... Father… I'm sorry...」

「Don't worry, Jean. Rest easy… I won't let you die here.」

Even in such an environment, his family still showed him their love. They take on the load that Jean could no longer shoulder, and even skip their food to replenish his nutrition. They desperately defeated the reality where the weakest would die first. They struggled under such a situation.

「Mother, look! I got my hands on some honey! Feed it to Jean!」

「... How… did you get that...」

「Not important! Here, hurry!」

Jean only realized a long time later how his sister managed to get those food… In the facility managed by the army, the only people they could trade with was soldiers. As a penniless slave, the price her sister had to pay in exchange for food— whenever he thought about it, Jean would clutch his chest and sob. In his memories, his sister was always smiling.

Unable to move his body freely, Jean felt anxious because he couldn't work for his family. He got better after resting for some days, but collapsed again when he returned to his work. This repeated throughout his second year. Seeing his family gradually

getting thinner over the days, he told them to abandon him. But when his father, mother and sister heard that, they would pat his head with a smile. The youth spent his life anxiously showered by the unwavering love from his family.

Their lives got harsher with each passing day— and his memories towards the end became a blur.

「— You—」

A quiet voice reached him in his deep slumber, and Jean thought—
Ahh, I have to wake up.

His family was working. For the sake of him who was bedridden, his father, mother and sister were doing everything they could. He had to work too. If he didn't wake up— If this continues, they would collapse from exhaustion.

「—alive?—」

Yes, I know. I will get right up
— tried to convince myself, and desperately opened his eyelids that were as heavy as lead.

「— Are you still alive!?」

His vision recovered, and he saw an unfamiliar set of uniforms. A face of a soldier not from Laos.

「—?」

Jean couldn't understand the situation and looked around him. Looking carefully, this wasn't the house assigned to their family. The place was similarly crude, with planks separating the space covered in straw. It has the smell of a stable.

「Good, you are alive! — One survivor! A frail child, get food and water over here!」

In the few years they struggled for survival, the situation had changed dramatically.

The Laos invasion of Bayoshie with part of the former Mamulan tribe had come to light. Kioka could see that they had to intervene, and took action.

They divided into two groups, one to liberate the conquered Bayoshie territory, and the other strike into Laos— After subjugating the political core, they marched for the slave farm. The Laos army exhausted from the long years of war was no match for the Kioka forces that had been building up strength, and the war ended in a blitz.

「— The situation here is worse than expected… But don't worry. The Laos army managing this place has been eliminated, and the Laos government implementing the slave system had been vanquished. You are no longer a slave.」

The Kioka soldier stated the truth to put him at ease. However, Jean wasn't paying attention. He was too weak to sit up as he looked for his family.

「... Where's everyone...? Where is father, mother, sister...?」

He asked his question with a stutter, and the Kioka soldier hesitated before answering.

「... Your family… are over there.」

He said before quietly looking behind him. Jean forced himself to sit up, and the soldier propped him up before continuing:

「They probably… collapsed from malnutrition a short while ago. The two older ones were placed on the straw side by side… The younger woman died holding you in her arms. We have respectfully placed them away.」

The youth saw the figure of his family members lying with their eyes closed. Their skinny limbs, hollow cheeks and eyes that would never open again— all that were burned into Jean's eyes.

「When this place fell, the crazed Laos soldiers massacred the slaves. There're piles of corpses outside. Your family must have escaped into the stables after realizing the danger, and hid there.」

Jean knew. Until the very end, his father, mother, and sister protected him. After he was brought to this barn, his family kept him alive at the expense of their own lives— that's why he was still breathing.

「You are the only survivor we found… I'm sorry we didn't come earlier.」

The Kioka soldier bit his lips in regret, then lowered his head in apology. Jean was envious of him.

He didn't have anyone to express his feelings to. No matter how much he wanted, he couldn't thank them or apologize to them.

The people who love him the most in this world— have fallen into an eternal slumber where his words wouldn't reach.

Jean who lost all his kin when he was saved was sent to a Kioka Youth Academy as a war orphan. His life as a slave caused him to lie in bed from illness for some time— but proper rest and nutrition in a clean environment allowed his young vigorous body to make a swift recovery.

「... Is there, any work, I can do?」

However, Jean's mind and body changed during his recovery. Firstly, he was very stubborn about work, and feared not doing anything. From cooking, cleaning, laundry and tending to the young children— Jean wasn't picky as long as there was work to do. He couldn't bear being idle, finishing one task after another, wandering around the Youth Academy for work to do.

「Please give me something to do. Please, give me—」

The second change was his insomnia. With the increase in his working hours, Jean's sleeping time decreased in contrast. From 8 hours to 6, 6 hours to 4, to 2, to 1— and slowly, no one saw him sleep again.

He was the model of a hardworking youth, and the Academy staff felt a strange quality about him. Rumours about him spread outside the Youth Academy, and word soon reached a certain man.

「—Hi, nice to meet you.」

After hearing the rumours, a man visited the Youth Academy where Jean was staying in. His dark blue suit was impeccable, and he wore the perfect politician's smile on his face. When they first met, Jean had no idea what kind of future this man would guide him into, and only had a vague sense that this man was formidable.

「I'm Ario Kyakushii, a humble politician in Kioka. I came here today because I heard an interesting rumour about you.」

The man stated his name kindly and chatted with Jean. The youth continued sweeping the floor with his head cocked to the side when he heard the man was looking for him.

「I heard you have been working nonstop without any sleep for almost a month. The Youth Academy staff are baffled too. Aren't you tired?」

「No— I'm not tired.」

Jean answered immediately with a shake of his head. Right then, a strange gleam appeared in his eyes.

「Everyone died when I was asleep. They died because I slept without doing anything— so I don't want to sleep. I can't sleep. I don't want anyone to die because of me.」

Jean kept speaking like a man possessed, and Ario narrowed his eyes. His body changed for a third time. The youth's light brown hair had turned completely white a few months after enrolling in the academy.

「I want to work. I can work as much as need be. I can do any work without rest.

So— Kyakushii-san, can you give me work?」

The white haired youth asked the man before him. Ario's smile deepened when he heard that.

「I see— how wonderful.」

The man walked over slowly and placed both hands on the youth's shoulders. His movements were natural, but the strength he placed on Jean was incredibly strong, as if to say he would never let go.

「This is a good trip— I have been searching for someone who will say that to me.」

The man adopted the youth who lost everything— of the many 「works」 he was nurturing, this child would be his magnum opus. That filled the man with excitement.

「... I had a turbulent life, which is somewhat similar to yours.」

Jean patted the head of his partner Sprite Luna and concluded his long recollection. Ikuta closed his eyes to imagined that life— then opened them a while later and asked:

「Your goal is to develop a Republic where all races coexist, right— Don't you hate Laos?」

「Even if I did, it already fell. Also— I remember there was a large slave market in Bayoshie too… And my family employed a slave purchased from the market.」

His recollection was filled with nostalgia and guilt. Jean had now realized the shadow behind his happy childhood.

「Her name is Raki, a quiet girl… No, she didn't have a quiet personality, it's just that no one taught her the language, so she couldn't speak much. I like her egg dishes, and would often sample the dishes when she was making them. She would always show a troubled smile before serving me a small plate...」

For Jean, this was a warm memory. However, what about her? He couldn't help wondering. She was bought as a slave. How did she feel when she watched her owner's family living blissfully?

「There was no justice in that war— just a meaningless mutual destruction. That's why I hate that 'meaningless' itself. I swear to not let the same thing happen again and joined the army. And now, I'm a general of an army.」

Jean summarized his way of life, then turned back to the youth before him.

「I will ask this again, Solork— Why are you defending the Empire?」

「……」

「From what I have heard, you should hate the tyrannical rule of the Empire. Are you trying to change the nation for the better by being a soldier? — or are you staying for revenge?」

When he heard that question, Ikuta also asked himself— should he save the country? Or destroy it? He had not given it any thought so far. Putting Chamille's wishes aside, what did Ikuta Solork want the Empire's future to be?

「No matter which path you choose, you should be able to see further into the future. Since you have learned history, you should know that monarchy governance has no future, even if we ignore the issue of corrupt nobles. Even if the Empress and you push for a revolution, all your effort would be for naught if the monarchs down the line aren't outstanding. To avoid that, we have to change the system of governance itself.」

Ikuta did not refute that point. They have pushed many measures to strengthen the nation, but that was only delaying the inevitable. It was obvious that they needed some kind of decisive change.

「Kioka has made preparations for this. We are not invaders, but repairmen that help failed nations to recover. So, if you aren't adamant about governing by monarchy— would the Empire accept our intervention? We promise to bring you to a brighter future.」

Jean was convinced that he would bring about change for a hopeless country. His goal was to save the people of the Empire all along.

「... Even if you want to advertise your methods, mixing ideals and reality isn’t a praiseworthy way.」

However, Ikuta stopped that proposal. Jean showed a bitter face.

「What you said just now are pretty words sprouted by those with high ideals in Kioka. There are plenty of people who think otherwise. In the first place, Kioka is a coalition of anti-imperial groups, and they must have their misgivings too.」

The youth pointed that out sharply. The white-haired officer’s view wasn’t equivalent to Kioka’s view.

「If I accept your intervention, those people will just flood into the Empire. What will they think when they see the defenseless people and land in this new territory? I won’t be surprised if we revert to the warring era.」

「No! I won’t allow such people to act as they please! I will deliver strict justice to anyone who violates the republic’s law!」

「With just you? … Regrettably, I don’t think people who think like you outnumber those who bear grievances to the current situation in Kioka. Like I said, your thinking is just pretty words, and in most situations, there are more despicable people out there.」

Jean bit his lips. He had experienced too much backstabbing to refute that. Ikuta saw what he was thinking from that expression, and sighed.

「It’s the same for Ra Saia Alderamin— instead of this war, I’m more worried about the aftermath of the war. Assuming the Empire is destroyed in some way in the future, can Kioka who had lost its common enemy keep the republic together? Has the Kioka Republic made up of different races reached such a stage of cohesion yet?」

「...!...」

「You asked me why I'm protecting the Empire— sigh, this is the superficial reason. Kioka hasn't matured enough as a country for me to entrust our future to them. Hence, I will have to figure out a way myself for now. The new measures will improve with time, and your side might get better in the meantime too.」

When he heard that, Jean renewed his determination to persuade him— As his adoptive father said, Ikuta could be reasoned with. His last sentence showed he still reserved some expectations towards Kioka.

「... Indeed, we might not be reliable enough now. And it's true that some citizens have very different thinking from the Republic's ideals. It can't be helped that you're worried about us failing to keep them in check when we intervene with the Empire.」

「Yes, that's why—」 「Since you're dissatisfied about this point!」

Jean cut him off, then leaned forward and yelled.

「How about you help us with that, Ikuta Solork?! You can take care of the area out of my reach, right? If you take command, lots of people will follow! You can let us deal with the selfish ones trying to incite chaos! That will double our forces, are you still going to say we will be short handed?」

「——」

Ikuta was dumbfounded by his persuasion. The silver eyes staring right at him filled the dark-haired youth with awe towards the Insomniac Brilliant General.

「— You are incredible.」

「...?」

「You are saying that to me. Someone who holds opposite ideals towards your way of life— you are able to sincerely ask me to cooperate with you?」



Jean nodded clearly when he heard that. The hostility was gone from his eyes now.

「I know your character and your past. I also talked about my past without hiding anything. And so, you can understand my thinking. I told you all that because I believe you can understand.」

Ikuta narrowed his eyes, as if he was staring at the sun. He realized that this youth was confident that he could relay his thoughts to Ikuta. He believed that if he acted properly, others would give the correct response.

The light shining from Jean was too bright… Because that was something the dark-haired youth could never have. Maybe he lost it a long time ago, and could never find it back. It was the pure trust towards all the people he had yet to meet.

In any case, this was the decisive difference between the two of them. The general born in the nation heading towards the sunset, and the general recruited by the country in its dawn. The gulf between resignation and hope lies between them.

「......!」

However, if they could welcome the dawn together...

This incredibly tempting idea flashed across Ikuta's mind—

After a long, painful, hesitation, he refused it with unwavering determination.

「... When are you going to rest?」

Ikuta asked quietly. Jean didn't understand the point of the question and frowned.

「If your schedule is full during the war and after the war, when can you sit down and rest? In ten years? Twenty years? Or more?」

The answer was obvious. The white-haired officer said without any hesitation:

「I will leave the right to rest to the future generations. I will spend my life developing Kioka.」

「What happens when you die? Who will replace you and take the lead?」

「Someone will definitely take the baton. The children who watch me grow up will—」

Before he could finish, Ikuta grabbed his collar and pulled him close. He headbutted Jean and yelled from his diaphragm.

「— Are you forcing them to live and die like you!?」

His cry echoed inside the pit. The dark-haired youth explained to his confused opponent.

「Hey, listen up! What you are doing unwittingly, and that the Prime Minister is doing intentionally, is to create a system that infinitely produces heroes like you! When you guys die from exhaustion for your country, the Kioka politician will declare that Jean Arkinex's way of life is the ideal model, and encourage others to mimic you! With no regards for their own happiness and serve the nation— They will gleefully educate the children, and tell them that is the right way to live!」

「——」

「The next hero will come from the children who seriously believe in this ideal, and become low cost expendable resources for them to use! They will become great pawns! Hardworking without seeking returns, and find joy from doing their best for the country— because they are raised to say that!」

The children would be taught to follow in his footsteps— when he heard that, the figure of a girl appeared in Jean's mind. Kasha Masukusu was a brave and forthright girl. Her eyes were bright and unclouded, and she wanted to be just like him when she grew up.

「......」

However, her smile twisted when Jean heard those words.

Jean tried to imagine. Assuming Kasha wanted to be a soldier like him after growing up. If she worked hard for this, and she had the talent and the luck to achieve results early, the higher ups would demand more results, and she would work even harder— she would walk a path just like his.

And what would happen after that?

Where was the destination of the girl who thought of him as her goal?

Since they would be walking the same path— wouldn't she say the same thing?

—*I will leave the right to rest to the future generations.*

Someone will definitely take the baton

「—— Ah——」

A chill he never felt before surrounded Jean.

He could see it now. He was walking an endless path which wasn't a campaign over several generations, but an endless infinite cycle.

There was no end to the development of a nation. It was a merciless device that would keep operating when given fuel, and wouldn't change even if the war was over. War wasn't the only thing that consumes lifes. Given a steady supply of manpower willing to throw themself into the furnace, it could expand without any ends. After expanding, it would require even more fuel. There was no doubt that this was the nation that Ario Kyakushii wants to build.

If so, then when would that time come?

The time when the right to rest wouldn't be passed on to the next generation? A time when everyone could live a blissful life?

When would the future generation he mentioned arrive?

「——」

The ground he was standing on seemed to be shaking, and Jean stood there in a daze.

「......」

Seeing the change in him— Ikuta gently let go of Jean's collar.

「... Getting all the citizens of a nation to share a common ideal is indispensable in the operation of the nation.」

Ikuta said after regaining some of his calm. He felt that he had to tell Jean the best advice from his position.

「However, that needs to be balanced with the happiness of the individual. Promoting selfless contribution to the citizens is no

different from committing fraud. A country exist for the sake of the nation, and the reverse isn't true.」

Ikuta concluded— realizing he had said his piece, he relaxed his shoulders. He leaned on the wall nearby, then said to the silent white-haired officer.

「... Hey, Jean. Isn't there anyone who has doubts about you working nonstop? Is there anyone concerned about your health and wants you to have a good rest?」

「......」

「There is, right? From what I can see, your interpersonal relations aren't that bad. Your adjutant— Miara-san seems to care about you. Didn't she say anything to you? If not, are there times when she is hesitant to speak?」

Jean couldn't answer. He had never given it any thought. Ikuta said to him with a sigh:

「You probably didn't notice… Her face is getting more sullen every time I see her.」

「Huh—」

Jean shuddered. He looked like a child who was admonished by his parents for making a non-malicious mistake. The dark-haired youth felt bad seeing him like this, and looked up with a sigh.

「... Give me a break, the features of Yaponiku people are very prominent, so I'm reminded of my mother when I see her. If you don't do anything, I won't hesitate to hit on her. I don't care if she is a soldier from a foreign nation or your adjutant.」

Ikuta spat out and then lay down. Jean already knew that was Ikuta's way of showing concern.

「An important person is staying by your side… Before you exhaust your life, think about that fact. If you do that, you might better understand her feelings.」

With that, Ikuta turned his back to Jean— and they didn't speak until dawn.

At the break of dawn, they were pulled out of the pit by a rescue party and descended the hill immediately. When they reached the foot of the hill, their worried acquaintances rushed towards them.

「Jean, you are safe—」「Solork!」

Miara took Jean's hands, while Chamille embraced Ikuta tightly. The two men soothed the girls for quite a while.

「Sorry Chamille, I made a mistake when I was trekking through the hill.」

Ikuta smiled to show he was fine. Ario who just reached asked the youth quietly:

「— Did my son give you any trouble?」

「... No. We just fell into a pit by accident and spent the night there.」

Ikuta shrugged. Ario looked at him and Jean with perceptive eyes— then muttered 「he got unexpectedly close」 before leaving. The youth was beyond shocked, and was completely stunned.

「Jean, go back to your tent first. Your clothes are dirty, and you need to do a health checkup...」

「*Yah*
*, I got it, Miara. You don't have to pull, you will tear my sleeves.」

「Ah— S-Sorry!」

The overly concerned adjutant and Jean were conversing a little off rhythm. Ikuta glanced at them before heading to the large carriage with Chamille.

「... The full body checkup is done. There's just some bruising and scratches, there's no serious injuries...」

After heading into the tent in the Kioka base, Miara carefully checked Jean's entire body. She received the report that Jean fell into a pit, and was worried if he was injured. Miara was relieved after confirming that he was fine. When she realized her half naked superior was staring at her, she backed away in a panic.

「Ahh… W-Well then, I will take my leave. Your change of clothes are over there. Sorry for going overboard...」

「— Miara, wait.」

The white-haired officer quietly called out to his adjutant who was leaving in a hurry. Miara stopped and turned back with a confused face.

「W-What is it?」

「There's something that is bothering. Take a seat and let's talk.」

Miara's heart fluttered when she heard Jean saying that in a serious tone. *Is he going to dismiss me from my duties*–
– She sat down as instructed and even imagined that possibility.

Jean looked at Miara who was less focused than usual, then paused for a moment before getting right onto the topic.

「Tell me honestly… Have I been making you feel uneasy?」

Miara froze at that question. She never thought that he would ask so directly. She wanted to brush things aside with an adequate answer for now… and when she was about to speak...

— *You can be more honest with your feelings.*

The words of that female knight echoed in her ears. As if she was encouraged by those words, Miara said her true feelings after a bit of hesitation.

「...... Yes, I have been worried about you.」

「... Why?」

The white haired officer asked. Miara's scowled, then answered with a trembling voice.

「Because recently— you have been enjoying yourself much more than usual.」

The unexpected answer made Jean open his eyes wide. Miara then poured out her feelings like a broken dam:

「After meeting Professor Anarai, you made faces that I didn't know about. You will get mad, laugh out loud, and talk about things outside of politics and military affairs. During this investigation, you are full of life too. This makes me feel very uneasy.」

「... You mean… I'm focusing less on contributing to the nation?」

Jean asked carefully.「No,」 his adjutant shook her head.

「Because I'm feeling that living like this will actually make you happy.」

He never imagined that would be the answer. She continued speaking to the dumbstruck Jean.

「You are sparkling right now— just as brightly on the battlefield. With no regards for obligation or responsibilities, you are giving your all to something you love… and finding joy in that. That's how I feel.」

「——」

「When you're speaking with the Scientists, you will be free from your heavy burdens for a moment. That's how it looks to me. And… You have been smiling with a face I have never seen before. Getting angry with an expression you have never shown, and getting troubled with a face that I didn't know. When I see all that… I couldn't help feeling how useless my existence is.」

Miara was tearing up. Jean shook his head in a panic.

「No— wait, Miara. You're misunderstanding. I spend all my time thinking about Kioka's future, this investigation is the same too. I'm dealing with this so seriously because it have significant importance on the political and military level—」

「I'm starting to think that this is wrong!」

Miara cut him off with a firm voice. Not just uneasiness, there was an equal measure of anger in her eyes.

「Why— Why are you the only one who has to work nonstop? Why are you the only one not allowed to rest? Why isn't the Prime Minister worried about your health? Even though you are the one working the hardest and most concerned for the country. This is wrong!」

She couldn’t stop anymore, and said everything she had been holding back. Jean couldn’t hold back his shock at the sincere words of the adjutant he had neglected.

「— Why are you saying that, Miara? You should know that I’m going to dedicate my life to Kioka. You should be following me because you want to support my ideals, together with your brother and the members of the Phantom Unit… Am I wrong?」

Jean checked their relationship with her in a trembling voice. Miara nodded gently.

「That’s right… However, I noticed. If this goes on— before we realize our ideals, you would have died from exhaustion.」

Her adjutant expressed the same views as the dark-haired youth. This shocked the white-haired officer, and tears rolled down the cheeks of Miara.

「Jean— I want you to live. The figure of you sprinting towards your dream is very bright. But I want you to receive just as much happiness as the effort you put in. I hope you can be happy, instead of the ideals in the distant future.」

「——」

「If not— I won’t be able to stop myself from cursing Kioka when you die. I will bear a grudge towards the country that squeezed everything out from you. I won’t be able to forgive myself… who is also an accomplice.」

She said with her nails grabbing her arms sinking deep into her skin, as she desperately suppressed the uneasiness welling up in her heart.

「I have been thinking about this recently. Standing in front of your lifeless body, I stab my blade into my chest in tears… Just thinking about that scene makes me shiver. It is really, really sad… I feel sad even now...」

「...!...」

「And the most useless thing is, I'm a woman we can't do anything aside from battles. If I leave the army, I will become useless. I know nothing about living outside the army, and can't make you smile like the Scientists do...」

「M-Miara—」

Her painful confession was too depressing. Jean couldn't just stand there, and kicked aside his chair to embrace Miara tightly— After being together for so long, this was the first time they hugged. She grabbed his uniform as if she was asking him to save her.

「... Sorry, I lied. Half of the reason I feel uneasy lies with me...」

「......」

「You are more important to me than anything else, but I can't do anything for you. I feel so frustrated because I'm so useless… I don't know what to do...」

Tears fell on Jeans shoulder and made his uniform moist. Jean embraced the sobbing Miara tightly, not knowing what else he could do.

Losing his place to stand, finally learning the thoughts of his comrade, Jean was in a world completely different from the day before— however, the youth still couldn't take the first step.

Two weeks after the accident involving Ikuta and Jean, they solved two more questions — and the Scientists were facing the 100th question since the trial started.

「—Stand alone in the center of everything, and call out its name.」

The Sprites said in a robotic tone for the upteenth time. The instruction from his partner made Bajin tilt his head in puzzlement.

「... Hmm～ standing in the center reminds me of the first question.
」

「Calling out a name is a question type that had not been used before. How should we interpret that?」

Nazuna who was standing beside him muttered with a troubled face. At this moment, Ikuta and Jean who led their troops to determine the reaction of the Sprites returned to the tent.

「So, how's the reaction of the Sprites?」

Anarai asked them immediately, and his two disciples answered with complicated faces.

「There were several reactions, but we can't determine the position. An reaction will happen and then stop the next instance— this happens repeatedly.」

「*...Yah*,*
it's the same on my end.」

When he heard the report, the old sage touched his chin.

「Hmm. The reaction stopped after an instant— huh.」

Silence loomed in the tent. Vackie raised her hand, her liveliness contrasted with that silence.

「I have a theory— It's not that the reaction is unstable, but the point of reaction is moving. Why not think about it from that angle?」

The Scientists all looked her way. Ikuta nodded in agreement.

「I concur. My reason is— the question in the beginning involves geometry on a flat surface, but the later questions involve spatial diagrams. It's shifting from two dimensions to three dimensions. And so— this will make sense if another variable has been added.」

His words made Chamille who was deep in thought raise her head.

「A variable other than a flat surface and the spatial dimension— That's right, the timeline!」

「Indeed. This question probably requires us to trace the position that has a reaction at different times to solve it. And the plan to search for the reaction will be much more tedious and difficult than before.

From the results we are seeing so far, there is a good chance that the reaction will move in a wide area. If we want to grasp it in a short time, we will need all the manpower we can spare—」

Ikuta said and cast his gaze towards Jean. The white-haired officer realized his intentions and nodded.

「...*Yah*
*, I understand. We will commit more troops into the investigation.」

「Yes, let's start with that, and spread out the soldiers in as wide an area as possible.」

The two quickly agreed to this method. After their close call on the hill, the clashes between them subsided. Chamille observed the two of them with a mixture of curiosity and uneasiness— was this the chemical reaction that Professor Anarai mentioned?

In any case, they assumed that the reaction would move in a wide range, and spread out their troops on the plains with as many soldiers as possible. Not just that, they also recorded down which soldier saw a reaction at what time in detail. After a few days of observations— The trend of the data collected made all the Scientists furrow their brows.

「...Ikuta-nii, the range of movement is incredibly big.」

「... That seems to be the case. Even if we spread out tens of thousands of troops, we won't be able to trace all the movements… On top of that, there is more than one reaction we are tracing. And the Sprites are showing different reactions too, so there are multiple reactions moving along the ground.」

Ikuta, Vackie and Chamille muttered as they stared at the map filled with notations. A while later, they lifted their heads with renewed resolve.

「Alright then— let's do this another way, and give up on grasping the whole picture.」

「Will that be fine? We don't even know the question, much less the answer.」

「We will have to stare at the data we have collected so far and utilize the imagination of Science.」

He traced the dots on the map with his finger. The saturation of data on the map seemed meaningful in his mind.

「At this stage, we can deduce a pattern. The Sprites reactions move in a line— some of them make one cycle in a day. Some Sprites would show the same reaction after 24 hours. Assuming all the reactions follow the same principle, we can assume that the reactions are circling around on the same route every day.」

Ikuta opined with a mix of his assumptions. Anarai walked over and interjected:

「If it is a daily cycle, the first thing I can think of is circular motion. This question is similar to the first question as it also asks us to stand in the center, so we can't ignore the possibility that this question also involves a circle. From the previous questions, we can see that they are establishing a foundation for later questions.」

The old sage included the intent behind the questions too一 with that in mind, he continued his line of reasoning:

「Assuming the reaction is a circular motion that happens once a day, we have to confirm if the Sprites will show the right reaction at a time and position we predicted. It should be simple to understand with a set square and clock. Since it will move 360 degrees in a day, then a reaction at 12 am, 0 degrees, will show the same reaction at 6 am, 90 degrees. Then 12 pm, 180 degrees. It might not be true if the speed changes in the middle— but the data so far hinted that the speed is constant.」

Without needing to be prompt, Ikuta said:

「If we want to verify, let's start from the smallest circle from the data. For convenience's sake, let's call this reaction A. To predict the circular motion, we will need to find the center, and that requires at least three points on the route. From the map, the arc formed by reaction A fulfils this criteria. But that's only if our assumptions are right.」

Master and disciple traded opinions and nodded at each other— With this in mind, they sent soldiers to multiple locations to check for any reactions. A few days later, when all the locations showed the same reaction at the predicted timing, the Scientists went up in an uproar.

「The actual data matches the predicted values. Looks like we found the right answer, Ikuta!」

Yorga said excitedly after verifying the data for the third time. Anarai nodded:

「From the verified data, we have proved that reaction A moves in a circular motion at a constant speed. For convenience, let's call this circle A. Since it's a circle, we can find the center easily, just use the method proposed by Chamille to solve the first question. That would be the center of circle A.」

The old sage said as he added new data to the map. The Scientists leaned forward to stare at the paper.

「We can verify reaction B, C and D, in the same way, and observe the movement in a wide area. It will take a lot of time even if we have ten thousand people. However— Jean, what's your view on that? Do we need to do this?」

Anarai suddenly asked the white-haired officer. But Jean shook his head without hesitation after thinking about it briefly.

「... No.」

「Oh. What's your reason?」

「It's my interpretation of the question. The Sprites said 『Stand alone in the center of everything』. They intentionally added the

term 『alone』, so I think it means the multiple circles have only one center?」

A few Scientists were surprised by that answer. Anarai looked satisfied, and pointed at the map with a smile.

「— That's right. We can deduce that the other circles aren't unrelated, and share a common center. It's easy to verify, since the path can be traced easily after learning the position of the center and one point of its path. If all the reactions have the same center, then we will be able to see the Sprites reaction at all the predicted positions.」

The Scientists nodded at each other. Just like the time they verified the movement route of reaction A, they dispatched soldiers to several predicted points. The result was as expected— all the reactions trace out a circle with the same center.

After verifying that, the Scientists followed Professor Anarai's proposal and marked out the center of the circle on the map. Everyone realized that the stage of using the soldiers to gather data was over.

「We can finally see it— the whole picture of this question.」

It was already 9 pm. Under the starry night, a large table was placed in the center of the plains. The old sage placed the map on the table.

As his disciples watched on, Anarai started guiding their thoughts to the final destination.

「Several circles with varying sizes— We can't use this directly, since the circles are a result of tracking various movement paths, they are traces of a circular motion, and not circles— The traces are formed by the objects moving with time along a flat surface.」

The old sage remarked and said quietly to the Scientists 「Let's confirm that information again.」 Bajin asked his partner Sprite right away.

「Stand alone in the center of everything, and call out its name.」

The Sprites repeated that information again. Anarai nodded.

「We found the center, it's about 100m to the north here. We just need a person to stand there alone and shout the name. Well then, what does the name refer to? There seems to be a name for this center. What is this thing?」

He asked everybody present. The Scientists fell into deep thought, and Chamille sorted out the information together with Ikuta beside her.

「... The circles are moving spots… They share the same center, and revolves around it once a day...」

A few key clues floated up in the darkness of their minds. A while later— the pieces of the puzzles fell together, and they looked up at the night sky.

「「「「「「—!」」」」」」

「Correct. That's the conclusion.」

His disciples followed the right track of reasoning to find the answer. As they watched on, Anarai stared at the map filled with notations.

「This is a mirror on the ground that reflects the sky. If we look up, we can find the answer there.」

The old sage told them as he walked alone to the north. The Scientists watched his back with bated breath, and thought about the process that led them to this conclusion.

The circular motion that cycles around in one day— a daily revolution. The Scientist knew that the answer he deduced wasn't an unrealistic proposition, but something that could be seen in nature at any day.

In the distant past— a person who never grew tired of looking at the stars discovered this pattern. The countless stars that move in a fixed timing, and the only star at their center that remained stationary. Before compasses were invented, it was a signpost that guides humanity, and the light shining brightly in the night sky was—

「Hey, North Pole Star!」

<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pole_star
>

Anarai Khan stood at the center that could observe all the circular motions, and cried out that name. And then— a dramatic change happened at that moment.

「「「「「「「Intelligence level reaching the standard has been confirmed. Conditions met— opening the door of the Storage Vault.」」」」」」」

The Sprites notified at the same time, and the ground dozens of meters away from Professor Anarai started to split apart loudly. After the earth was pushed aside, a metallic gleam could be seen rising up before the shocked crowd, forming a platform.

「Phew— what an extravagant showing!」

Anarai watched all that without backing away, while his disciples rushed to him out of concern. Before their eyes, something protruded out of the metallic platform. It was a conical object the size of a mid-sized tent. There were no windows aside from the entrance, and it was clearly hollow.

When the entire metallic object came out, the ground finally stopped moving. The tremors from deep below ground subsided— and the Sprites announced once again.

「「「「「「「Anarai Khan, Ikuta Solork, Jean Arkinex, Jenancy Labutesuma— these four are permitted to enter the Storage Vault as representatives. If you wish to enter, please enter the elevator within 72 hours.」」」」」」」

The Sprites named the four people. Anarai said after hearing that.

「Ikuta, Jean and the Pope— can we set off after an hour?」

No one objected. *I won't wait any longer than that*—
the back of the old sage and the passion in his voice emphasized that more than anything else.

Chapter 3: Wind-up Sprite



A few minutes after riding the elevator deep below ground, a gentle voice informed them they had reached the destination before the doors slid open. The four of them saw a corridor leading deep inside, with several junctions, illuminated by white light.

「It's very clean inside, without a speck of dust. I'm hesitant to call this a historical relic.」

Anarai exited the elevator and immediately touched the walls and floors made from unknown material. Ikuta and Jean behind him were also checking their surroundings carefully. Only Pope Labutesuma was silent as she followed and observed them.

At this moment— The white-haired officer searching ahead found a strange object and stopped. A figure they were familiar with, but had a completely different size, could be found about ten meters away from the elevator in a crevice inside the wall.

「What's this? A large sized Sprite...?」

「Oh, it seems to be sleeping.」

It was a gigantic Luminous Sprite the size of a ten years old child. Jean and Anarai approached and touched it, but the Sprite's eyes remained shut with no signs of moving. However, when Ikuta approached it, Kusu who was in his pouch spoke.

「Ikuta, Ikuta.」

「Hmm? What's the matter, Kusu.」

「I have a favour to ask. Can you pull out my soul stone and put it in that Sprite's neck?」

The sudden request made Ikuta stare with his eyes wide open. He could sense Kusu's intent, but even though it was the one that suggested it, he couldn't treat the Soul Stone of his long time partner lightly. The youth crossed his arms troublingly.

「... Is it dangerous?」

「No, and it will be temporary. Don't worry, I will always stay by your side.」

Kusu promised in its usual gentle tone, and the dark-haired youth believed it. He took out his partner from his pouch, and placed it on the ground.

「I understand. Go on then, Kusu.」

With his permission, Kusu closed its eyes and lowered its head, then ejected a small Soul Stone from its neck. Ikuta picked it up carefully and approached the giant Sprite's neck.

He could feel the Soul Stone in his hand was sucked in swiftly into the Sprite. Immediately after that— the giant Sprite before the youth opened its eyes.

「Initialization complete— Good Morning, everyone.」

The giant Sprite greeted in a tone Ikuta was familiar with, and left the crevice. Jean backed away warily.

「... I thought about it, but it really can move, huh.」

「You're Kusu, right?」

「Yes, Ikuta. Sorry for scaring you. This is the body used to welcome guests, and I will be your guide.」

Kusu smiled. Ikuta acknowledged as he carefully kept the small Sprite body into his pouch. He then asked his gigantified partner:

「You know about this place?」

「Yes. The information has been declassified, so I have knowledge of the facilities' internal structure.」

「Is there anyone here aside from you?」

「The only current active body is me. I will explain in order, please follow me.」

Kusu led the four of them forward. After passing several junctions, they soon arrived in a big room with a high ceiling. Four chairs were placed around a round table, and the light here had a warmer hue, unlike the ones in the corridor. There were machines with unknown functions by the wall, but it was clear to everyone that this was a room for people to rest.

「This is the reception room. I will bring some beverage, so please take a rest here.」

Kusu then went further in. The four of them had different reactions. Anarai started observing the objects in the room, Ikuta sat down heavily on the chair as suggested, and Jean stood by the door, keeping his guard up. Pope Labutesuma thought for a while before sitting down besides Ikuta.

「Sorry for the wait.」

When Jean sat down in resignation, Kusu bought cups for all four guests and placed them on the table. Inside the transparent cups

that had a different texture from glass was bubbly dark liquid. The white-haired officer frowned as he stared inside his cup.

「... I have never seen a beverage that look so much like poison.」

「When we encounter anything new, we have to ignore any preconceptions.」

Ikuta picked up the cup and moved it to his mouth, then drank a big mouthful. He swallowed as Jean watched in surprise— the unknown sensation flowing down his mouth made the dark-haired youth open his eyes wide.

「Ohh— I see, that's how it is.」

「Are you mad?」

「Calm down. We are deep in their territory, and would be long dead if they really wanted to kill us.」

The youth shrugged. Anarai came back after inspecting the facilities in the room, and nodded after sitting down.

「Indeed. Firstly, there's no reason to spend so much effort to invite us in and then kill us. It's better to accept their hospitality instead.」

He drank from his cup too. The old sage sighed as Jean watched nervously.

「Oh, this tastes great. This sensation in my mouth, is this soda? And it's unique fragrance makes it feel refreshing. It will sell great in a place with a hot climate.」

「Professor, don't you think it resembles that? The Coca leaves beverage we tried to make a long time ago. If we mix in soda instead of water, it should taste something like this.」

They discussed the beverage they just had. Seeing this scene, Jean couldn't suppress his curiosity and brought it to his mouth after hesitating a little. He carefully licked it with his tongue, and commented.

「... It taste like Coca, but in a way I never tried before.」

「Right? Kusu, can you give me another cup?」

「Of course, Ikuta. Everyone, please enjoy yourselves.」

Kusu picked up the empty cups and went back into the room. It returned quicker than before, and said as he served the cups.

「I'm glad it suits your palette. This is the best selling beverage during the era when we were manufactured. It's a rare chance, so I want to serve this to everyone who travelled so far to get here.」

It's words contained an important hint. Anarai pointed that out immediately.

「The era when we were manufactured— If I'm not wrong, that's what you said, right?」

「Yes, Professor Anarai. Your hypothesis is basically correct. We, the Four Great Sprites, are manufactured by a prosperous civilization in the distant past of this planet.」

Kusu admitted readily. Silence hung over the room as Anarai grunted.

「You are admitting that? I thought you would tell me in a more roundabout manner.」

「There's no point in hiding the facts from those invited here. Or rather, we invited you here to tell you about this— you must have a lot of questions, but can you listen to my explanation first?」

Before it was asked, Kusu preemptively stated its intention to explain everything. When they heard that, Ikuta and Jean looked at each other, and glanced at the silent Pope Labutesuma, before looking at Professor Anarai.

「I will hear you out then. Since you prepared a comfortable chair for me, I won't mind listening to a long lecture.」

Anarai said casually, and leaned into his chair which had armrests. The chair was made from unknown material that doesn't creak. Seeing no one was objecting, Kusu nodded.

「Let's begin. First, please put this on.」

Kusu announced and took out something that looks like spectacles and gave them out. The four of them showed different reactions as they put it on, and the light in the room went out. Jean was about to get up with a start when a scene played out in his vision in the next moment.

「This is a story that happened a long time ago, which no ones remembers except for the Sprites.」

Kusu's voice echoed in the room. Their consciousness flew back into the distant past.

── C.E. 2267. Tokyo City, Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda District. Technica Pte. Ltd., Headquarters building, 16th floor.

「Professor! I'm coming in!」

A woman scanned her iris in the security system as she knocked twice on the door. She wasn't expecting an answer and pushed the door open. The room being more messy than she expected almost made the woman fall on her knees.

「... I-I just cleaned up yesterday──...!」

There were delicate tools and equipment all over the floor, and even used liquid nitrogen canisters rolling around. She pushed the objects aside with her feet and walked in. There were other disasters created by kicks, but that was trivial for now.

「Professor! Answer me, Professor Rikka!」

The woman surveyed the terrible state of the room as she cried out. There was movement in a corner of the wrecked room, and a woman in a wrinkled white coat stood up.

「Oh～ What's the matter, Sapuna? You look distraught.」

That woman in a white coat, Professor Rikka, pushed up her Augmented Reality (AR) glasses and stared at Sapuna in a daze. She was far from presentable, which made her assistant cry out with a headache.

「You are asking me that!? I told you there is a project meeting at 1pm today! Why are you still here, it's going to start in ten minutes!」

When she heard that, Professor Rikka took out a palm sized computer from her coat to check the time. She was so engrossed in work that her AR glasses didn't even show the time, and opened her eyes wide in surprise.

「Ohh—? It's already so late, I'm so sorry! I got too caught up checking the data from the reports!」

「I know, so go get changed! The investors will be participating too, so you can't wear your usual wrinkled white coat!」

「Just watch me, changing quickly is one of my special skills! Heave ho!」

Professor Rikka boldly stripped off her clothes and tossed it to the ground. Sapuna matched her perfectly, gathering all the clothes into one spot, then ran to the water dispenser to fill a basin with water that was just the right temperature. While her assistant was rushing around, the Professor in her sports bra and underwear walked to her desk.

「It's finally your turn to shine. I will be counting on you.」

She touched 4 deformed mini humanoid objects one by one. When she turned back, there was a basin filled with warm water right at her nose.

「Please wash your face! When you're done, sit down there, I will put on makeup for you in three minutes!」

The assistant squeezed out facial wash on the Professor's palm. Professor Rikka obediently washed her face with the warm water in the basin. After scrubbing her face as if she would a potato, she sat down on the chair facing her eager assistant holding a makeup kit. The Professor suddenly asked in doubt:

「It's fine without makeup, right? I'm presenting the data, not my face.」

「Both your face and data will be presented! You are going to a meeting that is actually a war, are you going to the battlefield without wearing any armour?」

「I-I see, then I will put on my armour.」

「If you understand, then sit still!」

Sapuna shut down her objections and got to work. She was always swiftly and meticulously putting on armour for this woman who didn't care about her appearance.

「Thank you everyone for coming to this meeting!」

Thanks to her assistant's effort, Professor Rikka wasn't late, and stood in the conference room in a perfect suit. Sapuna beside her sighed in relief. There were around thirty conference attendees, half of them were major shareholders of Technica, so she couldn't irk them because of her outfit.

「I'm Rikka from Technica corp, and I will be presenting today. Let's start with the briefing, please activate the AR glasses by your hand.」

The investors put on and activated the AR glasses as instructed. It's common for briefings to be done in Augmented Reality or Virtual Reality, and with Professor Rikka's guidance, they purview the various data within that space.

「As you know, the situation in the euroasia continent has been deteriorating in the past few decades. Food shortage intensified armed conflicts, which caused more serious shortages, leading into a vicious cycle. Furthermore, the use of biochemical weapons heavily polluted the land, resulting in shortage in potable water in some regions. Please refer to the screen for details.」

The Professor played several short clips in succession. People drinking obviously unsanitary water and children rummaging trash cans for food— however, most of the investors didn't even bat an eye at that scene. This was no longer a surprising fact to them.

「We are in the 23rd century, but there are many living at far primitive standards. They aren't a minority anymore, and are increasing with time. We have debated time and again how to give them support. If left alone, poverty will lead to chaos, and become a hotbed for all sorts of crimes like human trafficking. It goes without saying that is a disaster all nations want to root out.」

The video vanished from the AR glasses, replaced by the flow chart of the current relief programmes in place. Professor Rikka pointed out the core of the problem.

「Transporting resources and dispatching talents to them are obvious steps, but in conflict zones with no clear government in power, getting the supplies to the citizens is a matter of luck. When we dispatch personnel over, there is the risk of injury, abduction and death. Hiring private security companies will eat into our budget.」

The blocks representing the cost started piling up visually before them to show this was a waste of funds. The investors looked troubled by that. Their investments being wasted without getting any returns was unpleasant for capitalists like them.

「The method we found was to dispatch robots instead of personnels, which eliminates the risks to our staff. However— there are already many human support robots on the market, everyone of them are delicate and expensive machines. Before mentioning the unit price, just sending robots to impoverished regions will create a lot of problem.」

The screen displayed the robots of other companies and their prices. One investor said with a sigh.

「... They will get dismantled and sold off by the locals.」

「It is as you said. For people living in a harsh environment, metal is valuable, even more so for precious metals. It will be fine if the robot is still functioning, but it will get dismantled the moment it breaks down. A technician might be able to fix it on the spot, but the citizens without such technical knowledge will be helpless.」

Even if they send delicate machines to regions without the basics in technical knowledge, they wouldn’t last long. After affirming this

common fact when supporting developing countries, Professor Rikka continued:

「We came up with a plan to solve this contradiction, which is 『lowering the cost of robots』 and 『building a circulatory system』. First, lowering the cost— we won't use any expensive spare parts containing precious metals. With the advent of robotics in recent years, we can realize this point. By using low cost artificial precious metals, it wouldn't fetch much money when sold, which solves the problem at hand.

As for the circulatory system, simply put, we will create a factory locally to collect the robots. As mentioned before, this will work synergically with the low cost of the robots. Since they can't make money by selling them, and it can be used after repairs, the citizens will want to fix the robots. We will need to send personnels to build the factory, but the estimated cost still falls within our budget.」

Professor then flashed the actual figures on the AR screen. The investors checked how adequate the numbers were, and asked her questions unreservedly.

「Are there any risks of the factory being attacked? Since it's a factory, we will need to station people there, right?」

「Allow me to explain.」

The screen changed, and a rectangular structure appeared before the investors.

「As shown here, the local factories would be a facility impossible for humans to invade. The openings are limited to the supplies and robots, which will be designed to be impenetrable by humans. The management of the facility, repairs, and operation will be handled by the factories automatically without any staff onsite. We have

considered hiring local security to guard them, but in theory, it can be operated without any staff.

The only problem is that we can't avoid scaling up the factory— I want everyone to note that the operation and maintenance of the facility can be done by the facility itself. Normal factories are supplied spare parts externally to manufacture their products, but this factory can forge the spare parts itself. With the improvements in 3D printers in recent years, this can be done. It only needs to be supplied with raw material, which doesn't require any special technologies. I hope it's clear that this circulatory system itself is the innovative idea.」

The manufacturing line could be seen through the transparent rectangular structure. A factory that could be operated without any staff— in this era, civilization was advanced enough to make this a reality. The investors accepted this and continued:

「I see, I get the concept— so, how does the most crucial part of the plan, the robot, looks like?」

This was the key. Professor Rikka broke into a grin and shut off all the AR displays. She then signalled to her assistant with a gaze.

「Please look over here— This is the mass produced human assistance robot our company is developing.

The Assistant Elements series.」

They peeked out from the box Sapuna placed on the table, and tottered over to the Professor and stood in a line. Surprised by its appearance, the investors were confused and shocked.

「... It's really small.」

「Instead of a robot, it looks more like a mascot. How can they help us?」

They raised an obvious question, and Professor Rikka said:

「Before I get into that, I hope everyone can understand that the AE series is used to raise the standard of living in impoverished regions— or a tool to maintain a certain standard of living. Potable water, breathable air, able to use fire anywhere, spending the night in a bright place, and a companion to speak too when you are lonely— these function of these robots is to provide humans with these basic convenience, and won't provide them with anything more.」

「So it can't do much?」

「If you put it that way, you're right. Considering the concept of low cost and circulatory system, I believe everyone can understand their functions will be limited.」

「I know that— but useless things won't be of much help.」

The investors pointed that out. Professor Rikka smiled boldly:

「Please hear me out before deciding if they are useless.」

「En, you're up.」 She said to the red robot on the far right. The mini robot, a Fire Sprite, raised its hands when it heard that.

「The first is the Fire Sprites— They can absorb materials from the air and any material to create flammable fuel. For example, if they eat rapeseed, they can make rapeseed oil. They can extract oil from any soft body that possesses it, then use oxygen in the air to burn them. It can even create hydrogen from water. With them around, people can always create fire.」

As the Professor explained, the Fire Sprite shot out blue flames from the 「Fire Hole」 in both of its hands. When Sapuna fed it raw olives, the colour of the flame changed. The Sprite was creating fuel.

「The second type is the Water Sprites— They can extract and filter water. Other than the function to filter harmful substances out from polluted water sources, they could extract water from soft objects, just like the Fire Sprites. As long as the humidity isn't zero, they can even gather moisture from the air. The efficiency of gathering water decreases in the order I introduce them. But as long as it is not placed in the middle of the desert under the sun, it can safely create potable water.」

Sapuna took out water that looked clearly polluted, and let the Water Sprite drink it. The 「Water hole」 in the torso of the Sprite created clear water in no time. The Professor caught the water with a paper cup and gulped it down. This was a live demonstration which she was good at.

「The third type are Wind Sprites— Their specialty is purifying the air and controlling wind. In regions with heavily polluted air, this will become necessary functions. The harmful substance they can process is shown on this chart, which includes almost every modern biochemical weapon— That's not all, although I hope this function won't be used, but they are somewhat effective against radiation pollution. It can also blow out air, suck in air and compress air with adjustable speeds, which will be very useful in clearing radiation pollution. They are also cleaning machine that can move freely at their own judgement.」

The Wind Sprite's 「Wind Hole」 sucked in air at a surprising rate for its petite body. Coloured gas was sprayed into the air to represent pollutants, which was immediately drawn into the Sprite.

After sucking for some time, the Wind Sprite spat out a small lump. Sapuna took the lump, which was the substance filtered from the air.

「The fourth type are Luminous Sprites— as their name suggests, they give out light. It's simple, but serves an indispensable function in the lives of humans. There are still many places with unstable or non existent power supply, which includes the conflict zones. The Sprites can provide a convenient light source to increase the productivity of the people drastically. A common example would be children reading by candle light.」

The Luminous Sprite's 「Light Hole」 shone brightly. The intensity and spread could be adjusted, and if necessary, the Sprite's entire body could be lit up in its Lantern mode. The Luminous Sprite could direct its light conveniently, efficiently using its energy.

「All these functions are possible through the solar power convertor inside them. As you can see, the Sprite's functions are just the application of existing technology, and aren't groundbreaking. However— implementing these four functions in a robot of this size is definitely the result of our company's independent research.」

Professor Rikka said with the confidence of an inventor. Miniaturizing the robot while maintaining its functionality was a selling point of the AE series that distinguished it from other products on the market.

「Furthermore, all Sprites have an important feature. They are a good communicating partner for humans. Because of the aforementioned conditions, there is a limit to how refined the AI is, but it can communicate better than dogs or cats. For example, when the parents are out at work, it is possible for them to teach the children to read and write.」

Professor Rikka explained before talking to the Sprites before her. She asked about simple calculations or history. Their conversation was normal, but the Sprites answered plainly and concisely. What surprised the investors the most, is that there wasn't any sense of dissonance when humans converse with AI. The Sprites felt really human— this wasn't limited to the AE series, and was a common feature of all the AI created by Professor Rikka.

「Aside from that, there is a restriction— our developers are strictly limiting each person to be contracted to only one Sprite. Do you know why?」

She cued the audience to think about this. And as expected, the experienced investors arrived at the answer in no time.

「I see— it's to stop a minority from hogging the Sprites, and to promote cooperation?」

「That's correct. This is the reason why the Sprites' functionality is divided into four types. When a community possesses all types of Sprites, they will have an easier life. And there will be more benefits by cooperating than competing— We want to create an environment where people think this way. I think this will be somewhat effective in preventing conflicts in the future.」

Each person would possess one function necessary for their livelihood, and help each other when needed. Keeping the collaborative nature of the plan in mind, the investors discussed the feasibility of the project.

「Hmm… in any case, this is a large package deal that includes the factory, not a product marketed towards the individual. The target audience are the country with impoverished zones, correct?」

「That will be correct, but we can also promote this indirectly to multinational organizations, reducing the risk of them defaulting on payment. But that will be after the success cases in the beginning are made public. Before that, we need to accomplish this goal with our own power.」

Professor Rikka said as she activated the presentation on the AR glasses. The familiar world map appeared before the investors, which then zoomed in on a certain area.

「Considering the above, the first repair factory, where the AE series will make their debut… I have a location in mind, a country everyone is very familiar with.」

The image showed a corner of the Euroasia continent by the sea. That place reached its economic peak a century ago, before it's national power gradually declined. It was the third most populous nation in the world.

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「... So that's the story behind your birth, Kusu?」

Ikuta said as he looked at the history shown in a corner of the AR glasses. Kusu nodded.

「Yes. As you can see, we, the AE series, were created to provide humanitarian aid to the people in impoverished regions. The first place of operation is the current Katjvarna Empire— a country named India back then. The war in the middle east during the 21st century affected India deeply. It remained stable politically, but it had many impoverished zones inside its borders, making it an ideal nation for a test case.」

「Hmm. Instead of suddenly installing them in a conflict zone, they are verifying their practicality in a relatively safer zone instead. And

before taking action, they gathered wealthy people, persuading them on the benefits of their inventions, huh. The way they conduct business isn't too different from the present.」

The old sage said sarcastically. Jean who was entranced by the video said:

「... I have a question, is this project conducted by a country? Or a organization bigger than a nation?」

「No, they are a private company in a nation called Japan— an organization of staff and investors seeking to make profits through the market. Like I said, we, the AE series, were created for humanitarian relief. But the premise is that the profit from promoting and selling the products is higher than the cost.」

「So the goal is to make money? After all the talk about helping the poor...?」

「From the ethical perspective of this era, both answers are correct. Well made product selling well can bring in more funds for the company, and increase the quality of their products. The money flowing in the economy will also stimulate the market, making the citizens richer. Seeking profits within an acceptable margins will benefit society as a whole— please understand that this way of thinking is prevalent throughout society.」

Kusu's explanation made Jean cross his arms and groan. Noticing his displeasure, Ikuta shrugged.

「Personally, I think this line of thinking is logical— leaving that aside for now, Kusu, you are very talkative today.」

「Yes, Ikuta. On top of the information being declassified, this large body is helping with my thinking. You can think of it as me having more room to think, so my mind is now sharper.」

「I see. In any case, I'm happy to see a side of you that I didn't know about.」

Ikuta looked at his partner through the AR glasses with gentle eyes. Kusu answered with a smile.

「Well then, let's continue— we will return to the viewpoint of the inventor and mother of the AE series, Professor Rikka.」

*

—C.E. 2269. Central India, slums.

「— Closer～! Slightly to the right… Alright, great!」

The voice of the photographer echoed out under the bright sun. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the locals holding the Sprites, Professor Rikka was smiling brilliantly.

「......」

Sapuna watched from the sides. It has been three hours since their interview here, and they were now shooting promotional photos. However Professor Rikka's face wasn't a farce. No matter where in the world she was, she was always like this. More energetic and cheerful than everyone, bringing energy to the people who saw her.

「— Good work, Professor. Please have a drink.」

The shooting ended a while later, and Sapuna gave an opened bottle of refreshing beverage to Professor Rikka who had returned. She took big gulps from it.

「Pwah— Thanks, Sapuna. I didn't do much, so I'm not tired. But this place is really hot.」

Professor pulled at her shirt and fanned herself. Her sweaty breasts were showing, and Sapuna immediately glared at the people around them to keep them in check. However, the subject herself didn't seem to mind.

「But you might not feel this way. How does it feels to return to your home nation after such a long time?」

Professor asked nonchalantly. Sapuna looked around her before shaking her head.

「... I have never liked this country.」

「Hmm.」

「Especially the atmosphere here, it reminds me of my home town which I never want to visit again… Thinking back, the environment there is slightly better than here.」

Sapuna answered after thinking about the environment she grew up in. At this moment— several kids surrounded them.

「Big sis, you are rich, right? Can you give us something?」

「Can you give me money to buy medicine? My mom is sick.」

The children pestered them and shoved their wooden bowl at Professor Rikka. Before she could even react, Sapuna pulled out loose changes from her pocket and tossed it in equal portions to all the wooden bowls.

「We won't give anything else! Go home!」

The kids scampered off, and Sapuna sighed irritably.

「They have practiced movements— they learned their begging techniques from their parents. Even for things like this, there is a clear difference between the skilled and unskilled. In a densely populated area, just one person can get enough to feed their family. I'm talking about begging, you know? Isn't that strange?」

Even Professor Rikka could tell that she wasn't being ironic. Sapuna watched the kids running away with a self mocking face.

「I'm the unskilled type— or rather, I hate relying on the charity of others. I'm bad at getting sympathy or acting cute… I remember being the burden of the family.」

「But you are better at handling numbers than anyone else, right?」

「It was a long time before I knew such a skill can earn much more money than begging… A non profit organization conducted an intelligence test on impoverished children as part of a census. I joined unwittingly and scored well, which was a turning point in my life.」

They were sweating from the hot weather, but the chill Sapuna felt made her shivered— She was imagining what would have happened if she didn't get that chance.

「There are no simple coincidences, everyone has the chance to break free from the cycle of poverty… It's the same for this place too. So, how about it? Will our AE series improve their situation?」

「I created it because I believe it is possible. At least— we can avoid talented people like you growing up without the chance to learn basic arithmetics. That's a big difference, right?」

Professor Rikka patted her shoulder. Sapuna nodded… her feeling of helplessness seemed to have lightened because of what the Professor said.

「... Hey, what's that～?」

Suddenly, a childish voice came from behind. They turned to find an innocent 7 or 8 years old girl standing there. Unlike the group earlier, she wasn't trying to beg and didn't have anything in her hands. The girl was pointing at the Professor's face when she asked that.

「Hmm, you mean the AR glasses. I can't give it to you, but you want to try wearing it?」

She manipulated the display before taking it off and handing it to the girl. Sapuna was on guard, ready to stop the girl if she ran off. But the girl just put it on, and yelled because of the information displayed in her field of vision.

「Uwah— I can see so many things!」

「The display is showing news sites made for children. Is there anything you find interesting?」

When she heard that, the girl pointed at one of the pictures— a large structure on the moon.

「... What is that strange thing?」

「Oh, you have good eyes. That's the latest technology in humanity's goal to go to outerspace, the Bertram Reactor prototype 1 spaceship.
」

「Outerspace?」

「That means the other end, beyond the end of the sky— a place no one had gone before. Because it's so far away, it will take millions of

years for the fastest vehicle to reach it. So we need a vehicle faster than that. Take you for example, you can walk if it's closeby, but if you want to go further, you have to ride a bicycle, and a car if you want to go even further. It's the same for outer space.」

「I can't ride a bicycle, I'm practising with my older brother.」

「That's great. If you work hard, you can operate an amazing vehicle in the future. For example, an outer space exploration craft like that.」

The Professor said seriously to the child, and didn't seem to be kidding. As if the spacecraft was just several steps above a bicycle— Sapuna realized this was what made her so amazing. People staying beside Professor Rikka wouldn't forget about how to dream.

After enjoying the information she never knew about, the girl was satisfied and returned the device to the Professor. She then ran energetically to the adults who were probably her parents. The Professor put on the AR glasses and watched her go, and then browsed the news site she frequented.

「However— the outer space exploration field reeks of danger. The closer the prototype is to completion, the more boos it receives. Unfortunately, I'm not directly involved with the international efforts, but I have complicated feelings about this as a Scientist.」

「Since they are developing an unknown propulsion device in the sky, it can't be helped if others treat it as a threat. Humans have the presence of using nuclear energy after all.」

「In theory, it's not that much safer than nuclear energy. But that's exactly why it's constructed on the moon instead of on earth. It will be more troubling if the conspiracist thinks they are being secretive or pulling some kind of scheme? The project has the approval of the

United Nations, and if the moon is not good enough, will they accept it if it's done on mars?」

「They will just complain with a different excuse. Since a long time ago, people's expectations towards outer space exploration have been decreasing. People prefer to have the budget spent on them instead, and others think the unknown technology will breach religious taboos.」

「It's fine if the earth can handle the increasing population. But the fact is, if we don't terraform other planets with the Bertram device, then 3 billion people will die of famine in two centuries. I don't think it will be wise to ignore this～」

Professor Rikka muttered with her hands on her hips. Because of how cute her pouting face and action was, Sapuna couldn't help saying sarcastically.

「Then the demand for the AE series will increase. The inventor, Professor Rikka, might become the messiah.」

「In a world that I failed to save? I don't agree with that.」

Professor shrugged unhappily. Sapuna sneaks glances at her ever changing expression happily.

＊

「—Which means, the people from that time were trying to migrate to other planets?」

Jean asked after sorting out the information. Kusu answered with a nod.

「That's their goal, and it is necessary. Overpopulation or underpopulation— the countries at that time faced one of these

problems, and the population was growing on a global scale. Adjusting the birth rate is a problem they couldn't solve until the end.」

Jean crossed his arms with a stern face. Even a world that was much more advanced than them, it was far from being a Utopia. He fell into deep thought when he realized that. The old sage beside him quickly got accustomed to the controls of the AR glasses, and then enlarged a part of the still image before speaking.

「Can I go off track for a bit? — Before we discussed the technology, the energy source they used are fundamentally different from ours, right?」

「I will explain the rise of the civilization based on electricity later, since this will be something you will face in the near future— unfortunately, the classification of more advanced technology is not unlocked. Even if it is, with the deficiency of basic knowledge, I can't even give a rough explanation.」

Kusu said apologetically. *I guessed as much*
— Anarai was unexpectedly okay with this explanation. The technology shown in the video was too different from what their world had. The old sage realized that this gap couldn't be filled easily.

「Even so, I still showed that scene to everyone, as it includes crucial elements in the history we will discuss. Ten years after the development of the AE series— they experienced a catastrophe.」

Kusu continued his explanation. Time progressed greatly from the previous scene— and they witnessed a civilization heading towards dusk.

*

— C.E. 2277. On a satellite path around planet earth, control room of the new spacecraft model 「Odyssey」.

「... Oh. We finally reach this stage, huh?」

Staring at the blue planet displayed on the screen, the person manning the helm on this memorable virgin voyage of this spacecraft sighed heavily. His colleagues seated beside him had the same expression.

「Long… it has been so long.」

「That's right— Frankly speaking, I was prepared for the project to be halted with just the completion of the training.」

One of the crew answered. They were selected as part of the crew in the early stages of the project, and went through harsh training as an astronaut. There was a huge possibility that their efforts would all be in vain. Because of various problems in politics and economics, the construction of Odyssey, a spacecraft with the Bertram device almost stopped several times. They were very thankful that they overcame all the problems and reached this stage.

「— Ahem, Captain. Apologies for disturbing you, but a large group of space debris is approaching our spacecraft.」

「Yes, the amount of space debris has been increasing in the past two centuries. Don't worry, there is no need to take any action aside from the exceptionally large debris. Everyone should understand the reliability of the ship's shield, right?」

「Don't you get it? No one likes their shining new car getting scratches from a coin.」

A crew wearing an AR helmet grumbled as he looked at the 3D radar image of the debris. At this moment, another crew said:

「Alright, it's time to broadcast to earth. It's at the same time as the space debris passing through.」

「This is your last chance to style your hair. Your opportunity to scout for a lover from the entire human race— anyone with outstanding tasks?」

The crew nodded at the Captain. Soon after, one of them started counting down.

「We are starting. 3, 2, 1— Good afternoon, citizens of earth—」

His first words to the entirety of mankind— was cut off by a sudden tremor.

— Same day. Technica corporation, India, Hyderabad branch company, basement 3.

「... Ughh...!」

When Professor Rikka woke up, she felt unexplained pain all over her body.

「Ughh… Guu...!」

She didn't know what was happening, and crawled on the cold floor with her hands, surveying the surroundings with her groggy head. She found a lot of her colleagues lying on the floor unconscious. Her familiar assistant was right beside her, and Rikka shook her by the shoulders.

「Sapuna...! Are you alright? Sapuna!」

Sapuna opened her eyes a while later, and slowly sat up. She was feeling the same headache, and nursed her forehead.

「... I'm awake. Are you alright, Professor Rikka?」

「Yes. I might have a fracture somewhere, but I can still move. Anyway, let's get help— ughh?」

Professor pulled out her PDA on reflex, but it didn't show the icon that indicates it was connected. Sapuna took out her own device to confirm too.

「My PDA is offline too… Professor, do you remember what you saw before losing consciousness?」

「... Yes. It was just an instance, but I hope I'm wrong.」

The two of them recounted what has happened so far. That's right— they were supposed to witness a historic moment with their colleagues in the India branch company. The spacecraft carrying the Bertram reactor has been constructed on the moon, and was returning in triumph. It would start a revolution in fuel efficiency, and have the potential to explore outer space with no regards to distance. Everyone was watching the spacecraft in excitement through their PDA, as the spacecraft hovered over the skies of the earth.

However, the ship that carried the hope of humanity— exploded. With over 10 billion watching, the spacecraft shattered into shreds in a manner that couldn't be intentional. People could only watch with stupefied faces at what was happening on the other side of the screen.

「... Let's ignore if this accident is intentional or not, the spacecraft disintegrated in the sky. The PDA than rang out in alarm, and we rushed from the third floor of the building to the basement.」

「But we still got knocked out by the tremors, which showed how strong the impact was. The probability is low, but did the shrapnels from the spacecraft land closeby?」

「If that is true, we can only lament our lack of fortune, however—」

As they spoke, the other employees slowly got up. They checked the others for injuries and went to a device installed at the room's entrance. The device was usually operated by the AR glasses, but it wasn't working now, so they had to operate it through the touchscreen.

「Good, the backup power and company's lines are working. Only the wireless line is down. We can use the cameras to check the situation at the upper floors.」

She said as she used her authority to connect to the surveillance camera. The image they saw made the two of them gasp.

「... It's terrible...」

Sapuna said with a trembling voice. The surviving cameras showed rooms with objects scattered all over, like a warzone, and people lying facedown on the floor.

「The damage and casualties are concentrated on the upper floors. But… What kind of impact hit us? This is different from being hit by the backdraft of a heat wave. This is like the aftermath of an intense microwave...」

It was clear the people on the upper floors were dead. Their bodies were in a terrible state, which made Professor Rikka frowned— Even a bomb detonating nearby wouldn't be so terrible. She had seen footage of cities hit by tactical nukes in the mid 21st century, but this was different. The tragedy she was seeing was unlike any she had seen before.

「Anyway, escaping underground was the right call. But we can only see the situation around the office building. If we have a wider field of vision, we can see how wide the damage is. But...」

The Professor manipulated the device in an attempt to find a way. At this moment, one of their colleagues snapped out of his stupor and said.

「Oh— Professor, I have a drone. It can't relay a live footage since there are no wireless connection, but if we send it out to film and then come back, we can—」

「Great! Please do so!」

The Professor nodded immediately. The male engineer input some commands to connect the drone with his PDA, and let it fly out towards the surface through a slit in the open door.

「Go! Please don't screw this up...!」

The drone would follow its flight program to navigate through the start and end point, but it would get stuck sometimes. Everyone hoped that wouldn't happen as they waited for tens of minutes—the drone answered everyone's expectations and returned successfully.

「Well done! Can we play the images right away?」

「Sure thing! But the screen is small...!」

The male engineer said quickly as he displayed the footage from the drone onto his PDA. The drone passed through the ground floor and flew out of the ceiling before ascending into the sky. It quickly showed the entire city—

「—Oh...」

They could see the damage inflicted onto the city they were familiar with, and the fires burning everywhere.

They couldn't even tell where the epicentre was. Within the field of vision of the drone, there were countless fallen buildings and broken roads...

「... P-Professor...」

Sapuna said with a trembling voice. Professor Rikka bit her lips.

「... If this is caused by the debris that has fallen here, then it's still fine. The disaster is limited to one city.」

She squeezed out her voice with quite a bit of effort. Because she knew that a death toll in the tens of thousands was an optimistic figure.

「However— if that isn't so, then the disaster will be at a global scale.」

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「— How did things turn out this way?」

When the tragedy witnessed by Professor Rikka's group was shown to him, Jean wailed. The 3D model of the globe before him was covered by a red destructive wave.

「This is caused by the Bertram reactor falling onto earth while it was active. The reactor fell into one corner of the Pacific ocean, and two spots in the Atlantic ocean, and a strong impact wave spread out on impact. The first disastrous wave hit everything on the surface of the earth.」

Kusu plainly stated this harsh content. Anarai's shoulders shuddered.

「... You said it's the first wave?」

「Yes. Depending on how bad a place was hit, the second wave might be more serious. The first impact was propagated through the air, while the second was a literal wave— a tidal wave originated from the point of impact and hit all the shorelines on earth. At this point of time, the estimated death toll was over 500 million.」

The number stated by Kusu was far beyond their imagination. Death toll of 500 million. The Katjvarna Empire had a population of 20 million, so 25 times that number died in a few short hours. And that was only the casualty at the start of the disaster.

「But the biggest shock to humanity was being cut off from the world at that instant.」

「Cut off?」

Ikuta interjected as he watched the beginning of the disaster. Kusu nodded before adding.

「Let's put it another way, they got cut off from their information network— before that day, all the nations on earth were connected through a high speed communication network. If you had a device on hand, you could check whatever happened at any place on earth with very little time lag. When a disaster happened in the past, they could use that network to send supplies and support from a safe zone.」

High speed communication network and a close cooperation relationship, that was the biggest advantage that the humans of that era had. However— the impact from the first catastrophe put that function out of order.

「Even after sinking deep into the ocean, the Bertram reactor's strong radio waves still disrupted communications worldwide. The

disaster hit all the humans on earth— but with no means to communicate, those in the disaster zones had to deal with the situation by themselves. This applies to the nation with vast lands too.」

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— C.E. 2278. India, Telangana, North Refugee Camp.

With the factory that produces and repairs Sprites at the center, tents and camp sites were erected. It has been eight months since the crash of the spacecraft, known as the Great Fall. The people who lost their livelihood kept flooding in.

「... To think we don't have to wait for two centuries.」

Professor Rikka sat down beside the factory and muttered as she watched the refugees… the people who came in search of the Sprites. If steps weren't taken to deal with the increase in population, the need for the AE series would increase with time— The dark humor said by Sapuna in the past came true drastically ahead of time.

As she was thinking about that, Sapuna jogged towards her.

「... I gathered the testimonies from the survivors, and confirmed them. Aside from the places near the shoreline that got flooded, the factories we built had all survived. Thanks to the evacuation facilities, the factory survived the impact, and the people are building refugee camps around them.」

「I see… So it's great that it served its purpose?」

Complicated emotions welled up, and Professor Rikka said what came to mind. There was a short silence before her assistant said with some hesitation.

「... Sorry, Professor. We haven't been able to contact your friends and family in Japan...」

「Oh, it's fine. After hearing the situation along the shoreline, I can imagine how my home nation that is surrounded by the ocean would be.」

The Professor waved her hands with a dry smile. She didn't need to check to know the situation in her home nation from the fragments of information she had gathered.

「Sigh, the capital Tokyo is definitely destroyed. It's questionable whether the government functions can be shifted inland… Worst of all, the disaster happened during a parliamentary session. How many Ministers and Senators survived? That's questionable.」

「... Ughh...」

「Hence, we can still be hopeful that the United States, China and Russia which had vast territory inland to take action— but at this stage, all the countries are having a tough time just dealing with internal affairs. For now, we have to survive in this place too.」

She said as she drank the well water purified by a Water Sprite. The recovery of the living facilities were not progressing at all, and many people had to make do for now.

There were more tents here than yesterday. Sapuna looked at the factory behind her uneasily.

「There are more people coming here for the Sprites, can the production and repairs keep up?」

「It will be fine for now, and when it's overloaded, we can direct them to another factory. Considering the population in other zones, it should be less crowded there.」

Professor Rikka analyzed calmly— After leaving the office with their surviving colleagues, they saw that the basic facilities for living in the city had been destroyed, and headed straight to the factory to set up a refugee camp. This saved many people who had nowhere to go, but they couldn't find the way to recover their old way of life.

Professor looked at the crowd as she took out her PDA from her white coat pocket. The computer retained its function because the Sprites charged it— but when she unconsciously checked her email and social media sites, she remembered for the upteenth times that it wouldn't work.

「Again. I know the network is down, but old habits die hard… The era where you can connect with anyone with a computer seems like an old dream.」

Professor muttered as she looked up into the sky. Sapuna sat down beside her without saying anything.

After learning that Professor Rikka did everything she could to help the refugees after the disaster, and the great help the AE series has been, the Indian government officially worked together with her. As time passed, planes from other nations landed at their airport to learn more information, and one of them came just for her.

「Professor! A guest from the United Nation wants to meet you, Professor Rikka!」

When her assistant Sapuna was calling for her, the Professor was documenting the interaction between the refugees and the Sprites. She stopped tapping on the virtual keyboard on her PDA and turned around. A man in military uniform behind Sapuna said happily.

「Ohh! You must be the inventor of the Sprites, Professor Rikka, right!? I'm surprised, you are more charming than your photo.」

「It’s been a while since I last heard a joke like that. You must be from the United Nations, may I have your name?」

「I’m Frederick. As you can see, I’m a soldier. I have many things to discuss with you, but this isn’t a suitable place. May I invite you onto our plane?」

The man gestured at the airport with his thumb, Professor warned him.

「That’s fine, but please don’t abduct me. I’m not anyone important, but this place needs me.」

「We won’t do things like abduction. However— not just this place, the entire world needs your ability. That’s how great you are, please remember that.」

Frederick said seriously. Sensing his words weren’t just social niceties, Professor Rikka felt a stir in her heart.

She was chauffeured to the airport along with her assistant Sapuna, and after finishing some tedious diplomatic procedures, Professor Rikka was invited onto Frederick’s small United Nations plane. Some of the seats had been dismantled to create a meeting room, and a middle aged man was waiting there for her.

「Nice to meet you, Professor Rikka. It’s an honour to meet you… My apologies that our first meeting has to happen under such circumstances.」

The man’s first words were self mockery. When she saw his face, Professor Rikka opened her eyes wide.

「—Dr. Bertram? The man himself?」

「... Yes, that Bertram. Forgive us for troubling you to board the plane even though we are visiting… Because of my current situation, it won't be a surprise if I get lynched.」

The exhausted Bertram said. Professor Rikka gasped. The reactor designed for the spacecraft, the Bertram device that would herald the future of humanity— the man before her was its inventor. However, what humanity was facing right now ran contrary to his intentions.

「I have something I want to ask if I ever see you. Was that— an accident? Or done intentionally? What went wrong—?」

「Judging from the conclusion, it's both. The direct cause is a mini bomb hidden inside space debris, a new method of terrorism. We aren't sure who is behind it, but—」

「But?」

「... The probability of a terrorist attack is small, so we never considered it. We also simulated the reactor suffering serious damages in a terrorist attack. However… in the ten thousand ways that the reactor is destroyed, there are a few hard to predict outcomes. And we hit the jackpot.」

Bertram lamented. Professor Rikka listened to the professional explanation for about ten minutes, and then summarized it.

「... In short, the government pushed your project forward anxiously, resulting in lapse in security management. On top of that, the new method of terrorism caused an unprecended catastrophe— is that it?」

「That's correct… This isn't an excuse, but I have pointed out these unstable factors ahead of time. To be safe, I wanted to push back the

project for one year. However— however, the government rejected the proposal! If they lose the support of the people and stop the funding, the Bertram device would not be completed! Thinking that humanity would not have a future if I don't get results, we got too impatient...!」

Bertram grabbed his hair in regret. Thinking about how they felt right now and during development, Professor Rikka couldn't say anything.

She knew... The Bertram device was an invention hanging on the edge despite its great potential. With the nations losing interest in space exploration, his invention was said to be the last ditch effort. With his budget being cut due to the criticism from society, they fought on valiantly. All for the sake of changing the future where 3 billion would die from starvation—

「......!」

Because they were too impatient, the disinterested view from society made them even more anxious. And the malicious terrorist attack— caused this tragedy? That made her bit her lips. The entire thing was too regrettable.

「... Dr.Rikka, I'm familiar with your work, especially your theory on AI. Most importantly— our field of expertise might be different, but we share a common goal in saving the future of humanity. I feel ashamed that I'm pushing the problems I made onto you...」

Bertram hung his head and said weakly. Professor Rikka grabbed his shoulders firmly with her hands to stop him from saying anything more.

「Let's talk about the future, Dr. Bertram. There should be a reason you came all the way here to visit me.」

No matter how much they regret the past, people had to look towards the future. She conveyed that to the Doctor. Bertram raised his head and faced Professor Rikka properly for the first time.

「Yes, you are right, I'm here to talk about the future with you… To talk about the bleak future of mankind.」

He started with that— and what he said made Professor Rikka shivered.

He told her that the Bertram device in the ocean would operate uncontrollably for several millennials. With no way of destroying or recovering it, acting recklessly might cause a second catastrophe on the level of the Great Fall.

The berserk reactors were emitting all sorts of radio waves— known as Bertram waves, it had the terrible effect of blocking communications throughout the globe. Climate change, rising sea levels, the disruption to the ecosystem— there were countless problems, but there was one that had the greatest impact on humans. The drastic fall in the survival rates of children. The Bertram waves were a great threat to the children who lacked resistance towards external pressure, and most of them would die before maturity. From the estimated research values, only one out of twenty children would survive until adulthood—

After listening to him for more than an hour, Professor Rikka used her PDA to receive the detailed data from the Doctor's data storage device. Even she was dumbstruck. Humanity was in a worse state than she ever imagined, which shocked her deeply.

「... What can I do?」

She said after taking a few deep breaths. Bertram answered with a question.

「Can you continue building factories for the AE series?」

Professor Rikka nodded, then took out a small data storage device and handed it over to him.

「Please take it back with you. The schematics for the Sprites and the factories are all in there. Normally, I should get permission from the main office before making this decision… But I have not received any communication at all, and waiting probably won't do any good.
」

Now wasn't the time to act with the benefits of a corporation in mind. Bertram received the storage device respectfully, but showed a sad face as he stared at the object in his hand.

「Thank you. However— practically speaking, aside from this place, there isn't much change for the AE series to be popularized.」

Professor Rikka stared with her eyes wide open. Since he came all the way to visit her, she thought his goal was to bring back the Sprite to his country, and didn't expect that.

「You don't need it? Has the United Nations recovered that far?」

「I wish, their situation isn't too different from here. The problem is with the mind of the people. You can probably guess how our political scene was hit by the Great Fall.」

Bertram sighed heavily. Professor Rikka's face turned gloomy. With how many lives were lost in that incident, the people will want an answer.

「The tendencies of the people moving towards anti-Science. It's the era where those claiming the world is ending has the most power. We Scientists are their target as we clinged to our authority to speak.

And me, the mastermind, won't be surprised if they roast me alive.
」

「......」

「The one glimmer of hope is that we know about your place. Build more factories centered around Asia. There is nothing better than the words of mouth from the people who benefit from the Sprites.」

Bertram said as he signaled Frederick who was standing still behind him. The soldier brought over a briefcase when he saw that.

「We want to give you this… The vaccine for a new type of humans.
」

Professor Rikka looked at the case Bertram gave her confusedly. The Doctor showed a bitter smile.

「There isn't some weird child of Science inside. Simply put, this is a patch to update the human hardware— a stimulant to change the genetics affecting the functions of humans. Our country did research in case of such a situation. We couldn't do it openly due to ethical reasons— even without that incident, we have been taking precautions in case the environment on earth changes drastically.」

「Genetic manipulation?」

「That's right. To overcome the climate change I mentioned just earlier, we have to either hide deep underground or remake our bodies… My nation is leaning towards the former. Right now, each state is building underground city vaults. The citizens think this is the choice made through democracy, but there are no ends to their protests.」

Professor Rikka took the briefcase for now and thought with a complicated face.

「Only those who live underground, or people who change their genome can survive… There are two choices, and it's difficult to judge which is better.」

「For this country, the latter is more realistic. If that's what the people choose, then mass produce this stimulant while you can spare the effort. The method is simple. If you vaccinate women before their third month of pregnancy, there is a high probability that their child can adapt to the environment. And that's also true for their descendents.」

Which means, this wasn't a treatment for just one generation, but changing humanity in the future too. If not, humanity would not be able to survive, Bertram emphasized. Realizing the seriousness of the matter once again, Professor Rikka asked:

「Building more factories and increasing the new type of humans that can survive the change in the environment… If we don't hide underground, those are the only two methods we can use in our limited time, right?」

「There might be other ways, but I can't think of any. I plan to travel to other nations and tell them the same thing. I don't know whether they will believe me though.」

Bertram showed a face of self reproach. He bowed deeply at Professor Rikka, and said to her as in prayer.

「Please let the people survive, Professor Rikka. I hope it doesn't come to this, but if the other nations choose the wrong method— then this place might become the last bastion of humanity.」

After ending the meeting with Bertram, they were sent back to the dormitory assigned to them by the Indian government. When they were finally alone in their room, Professor Rikka who had been silent for the entire ride finally spoke.

「... Leaving the building of more factories aside, the problem is the mutation stimulant.」

She said as she pointed to the briefcase on the bed. Another set should be given to the Indian government too. Even so, this was still an important item that would affect the future of humanity. The Professor crossed her arms as she stared at the briefcase.

「This is something developed by the United Nations and delivered personally by Doctor Bertram. We will need to inspect it, but we can expect it to be effective. However— if we want to vaccinate the masses, we need someone to lead by example.」

So she needed to start with human experiments. After acknowledging that, she said in resignation.

「There's no other way, I will find a man and have a child.」

「—? Wait, what are you saying!?」

Sapuna pressed her in a panic greater than anything she had shown before. Professor Rikka said stiffly.

「You are asking me why? We can't start without someone testing it out. Given this situation, it's natural for me and my child to take the lead.」

「N-No, you can't do that! If the Professor gets pregnant and can't move freely, then who will push for the building of more factories!? You must maintain a body that can move freely around!」

「You're right, but the mutation stimulant is—」

「No! Definitely no! I would rather do it myself!」

Sapuna shook her head stubbornly, screaming in her refusal. She blinked away tears, and the sight of that made Professor Rikka stop her anxious thoughts.

「... Sorry, Sapuna. My thinking is too extreme. We both need to calm down.」

She placed a hand on Sapuna's shoulder to soothe her. Sapuna collected her breathing. When she calmed down a while later, she wiped away her tears and said:

「... I don't think we need to rush this. In India, there is a trend for the wealthy class to adjust the genetics of babies. If they know that the situation will worsen with time, they will ask for the medicine to strengthen the bodies of their children on their own.」

「I want to increase the number of users, but also ensure they think this through calmly. This is also a matter of personal and religious beliefs. After all, this stimulant will pass on the adjusted genetics to their descendants.」

「But the ones who have to face this are the users themselves. You only accepted something Doctor Bertram handed over, you are not the inventor of the stimulant. There's no obligation for you to take the lead, please don't shoulder too much responsibility.」

Sapuna said to her with a glare. Professor Rikka concurred with a nod, but couldn't shake off the worry in her heart.

「... I'm also a Scientist like Doctor Bertram. I supported the development of the Bertram device. Am I not partially responsible for the predicament that mankind is facing?」

「Even if that is true, you should take responsibility by promoting the AE series, correct?」

Her assistant's reply was firm. Professor Rikka smiled wryly. *What should I do*
— she felt a chill whenever someone asked her that.

Bertram's predictions were on point. There were no signs of the global communication recovering, and large tornadoes struck the lands with high frequencies. Riots broke out in regions with poor transport lines— worst of all, the children of the world were dying from unknown diseases.

In contrast with the deteriorating situation, demand for the AE series was growing with no end. Factories were set up all over the Euroasia continent, and the famous Professor Rikka traveled around the land to promote her Sprites. The genetic manipulation stimulant given to her by Dr. Bertram was equally prominent, and the adults who feared the death of their children formed long queues at the hospitals.

「The mutation stimulant can't keep up with the people's demand! Professor Rikka, do you have any good ideas?」

「I'm out of ideas. We don't have the manpower and facilities to increase production further. Because of the Bertram wave, factories not built to the standard of an evacuation facility are breaking down… We can only produce what we can for now, and distribute as much of it as possible.」

Starting from India, many governments consulted her with regards to this. But with the weakening support of the Scientific community, there was a limit to what she could do. The Bertram wave didn't only affect living beings, it also reduced the durability of structures. Buildings which weren't constructed with special means were deteriorating at an alarming rate, and historic sites crumbled one after another. No country had the budget to prevent that now.

The situation in India was changing with time. When they heard the news that the AE series would be given out for free, refugees swarmed in from everywhere. This was true for the many factories erected before the Great Fall.

「— We can see all sorts of races now. Asia, the middle east, and Russia are connected by land, so it's natural for the refugees to come. But it seems that people from Europe, America and Africa are coming too.」

Professor Rikka said as she watched the refugee camp that had changed over the years. Sapuna nodded and said:

「They heard about the AE series and came here from the impoverished regions. They probably think they will have a better life here than in their own country. And so— it's awkward for me to say this, but even survivors from Japanese came here.」

「Yes, I spoke with them before. Tokyo was destroyed, and our main office had sunk into the sea. We are officially unemployed now, what should we do, Sapuna?」

「We can just use the title of a Scientist Consultant of the Indian government and her assistant. No one will nag and demand us to update our work permits, and in a sense, this is an upgrade— Cough! Cough!」

Sapuna suddenly stopped and coughed violently. Professor Rikka held her shoulders with a pale face, then carefully sat her down.

「... I'm fine, I didn't vomit blood. But my body has been acting up recently. Don't tell anyone, but it's been a long time since my last menstruation.」

Sapuna tried to calm her breathing and confessed. Professor Rikka held her body which had grown more frail than before tightly.

「Me too… there are still many unknowns about the Bertram waves effect on adults. Record down any symptoms you are aware of. This is our obligations towards future generations.」

The Professor said with a sense of resolve, and Sapuna nodded firmly… They didn't need to say anything more to know that they wouldn't live long.

Another few years passed, and people's thinking had a clear inclination. With no signs of recovery any time soon, they turned to religion for strength, and many churches explained the Great Fall as an extraordinary existence's punishment towards mankind. Discard your shallow wisdom and kneel before the will of god— they proclaimed and often protested at the entrance of the government buildings.

「Anti-Science, huh… I heard they were rampant in the United Nations, so it finally spread here?」

「There were embers here in the beginning, so it's more accurate to say that they are linking up. The religious inkling is deeper than I imagined. Mankind is punished for their arrogance, and they should toss aside their filthy wisdom and submit to the will of nature— that's the gist of their ideology.」

「Sigh, I have no comments. I think this is slow suicide, but they are the ones who have to decide how to live. However— is my eyes failing me? Most of them have Sprites invented by me.」

「Even if they think Science is to be blamed, very few will abandon Science completely. In the end, they pretend not to see the things that are useful to them. Because it's a problem if they don't have anyone to blame, and it is problematic if their way of life is inconvenienced.」

They stood shoulder to shoulder and watched the demonstration from the window of the government dormitory. Sapuna suddenly changed the topic:

「By the way, our environmentalist made an interesting speculation. It's about how long the Bertram device in the ocean will completely stop operation. You want to know?」

「Yes. When you say 'interesting' with such a tone, I know it's not anything good.」

「You got that right— according to the estimations, the device will stop completely around C.E. 7500. Mankind will only be liberated from this situation 5,000 years from now.」

She said that number plainly, and Professor Rikka looked up at the sky with her finger on her lips.

「Five thousand years— Five millennium, huh? …That's a bit long.」

「A huge decline will come much earlier than that, in just a few centuries.」

There was no hope for the situation to improve dramatically in a generation or two. Thinking about the long dark ages mankind would

be facing, Professor Rikka sighed and looked at the demonstration again.

「... It would be difficult to recover to the Scientific standards of the past. The people lack the will and the skill— for a long time in the future, humans will live with their heads bowed to the sky.」

The moment she accepted this fact, a glimmer of resolve sparked in her eyes. She clenched her fists and turned to her assistant.

「Even so, we can't let mankind lose Science. We can't let everything we accumulated be for naught. I will make my final struggle. Sapuna, will you help me?」

Sapuna nodded with a wry smile. It didn't matter how she lived or how she died— the only thing she decided was who she would spend her days with.

They visited the first factory built in Telangana in the middle of the night. They passed through a hidden door that only a few people knew about, and went inside.

「It's strange to consider this a good thing, but after Scientific civilization becomes a thing of the distant past, the AE series should be able to remain as a partner of humanity. But we have to decide now. Now is the only chance to give instructions to them. From now on until a thousand years later— how will the Sprites support mankind?」

They walked in the dark passage illuminated by a Luminous Sprite, as Professor Rikka spoke. Instead of a conversation, she was just saying out what she was thinking.

「Supporting their livelihood and observing them— that's the extent of what they can do. Humans have to choose their own future. Science can give them more choices, but it can't force people to

make a choice. I think mankind has the freedom to make choices against the statistics and logic.」

This made Sapuna smile— even at this juncture, Professor Rikka has no intent on forcefully interfering with humanity's future. The people might hate Science, but she didn't hate the people. Her only intention was to leave better choices for their future.

「With that in mind, the only thing we can do is leave our knowledge behind. For the time when the people will need Science once again, the only underground evacuation facility will become a place to preserve the wisdom of mankind, instead of physical people.」

She wasn't talking about India, but the project her colleagues were undertaking in the northern side of the Himalayan mountains. If they had to maintain an evacuation facility for millennials, the best place would be somewhere isolated. It was tough since there weren't any factories nearby, but fortunately, the AE series was already commonplace in the northern region of the Himalayas. In the far future, the people living there might become its guardians.

「Another thing, I have decided on how to use the remaining resources in all the factories.」

「And what will that be?」

「Taking records. Not for the past, but for the sake of the future. I want to record the long dark ages that mankind is going through in as much details as possible.」

Professor Rikka said without any hesitation as she stared at the Sprite she was holding.

「What the Sprites see can be recorded down as footages. Their memory capacity isn't big, but we can extract the data when they come to the factory. When the Bertram wave dies down,

communication will slowly recover, and the data from the Sprites can be uploaded to the factory wirelessly. But we can only keep the more important data.」

She said as she walked into the deepest area before stopping.

「However, that will only leave behind video footage. I want to preserve something more substantial in history. Using past history as a reference, that will be the great people related to revolutionary changes— like Caesar or Nobunaga, and what they were thinking. Future people will explain their personality and way of thinking, describing these heroic characters. If we can leave behind a definite answer, it will surpass any existing historical data.」

She said as she touched the walls before her. Sapuna tilted her head, wondering what Professor Rikka was doing, and Rikka continued with her back turned.

「Then let me ask you one thing. What's the topic of my graduation thesis?」

The problem echoed in the dim space. Sapuna felt a chill on her back and answered:

「—『The Digitization and Preservation of the Human Psyche』. The personality isolated from the hardware of the human body, or the recreation of the soul with Science.」

When she heard the perfect answer, Professor Rikka turned back to her assistant with a bold smile.

「That's right. I have been researching on how to let AI possess a personality, and both of these studies are the same. In recent years, the technology in scanning the human brain improved drastically. I think this is the time to unveil this thing.」

Professor knocked her forehead with her fist. Sapuna nodded confusedly:

「I know, but why are you bringing this up—」

Before she could finish, a gust of wind came from behind Professor Rikka. This was caused by the difference in air pressure in a sealed room. The wall that didn't have any gaps slid open and revealed its insides— it was filled with unknown apparatus wrapped with thick cloth.

As her assistant watched dumbfoundedly at the unexpected sight, Professor Rikka pointed behind her with her thumb.

「This is a prototype scanning machine to digitize and preserve the human psyche, but it's in a disassembled state. Including all the stores we have in the other factories, there are 100 of them.」

She declared boldly. When she heard that— Sapuna took several minutes to compose herself.

「... There are so many things I want to ask that I can't say anything. But first— why keep it in the factory? Did you predict the Great Fall ahead of time?」

Professor Rikka crossed her arms seriously and answered the question that was asked with much self restraint:

「I can only say this now— When I was making this, the higher ups wanted me to temporarily halt the research. As you know, the medical field was making great progress in analyzing the functions of the brain, right? They were hesitant about the medical field collaborating with my research, since it might create confusion in society.」

Surprised that something like this was happening without her knowledge, Sapuna finally understood. The digitization of the human psyche— there was no way the Professor would give up the topic she pursued in her school days so easily.

「And so, the higher ups ordered me to destroy all data related to this technology, except for the parts kept by the government. We even made a scanning prototype, but couldn't continue the research in our country. So I came up with another plan— I think you can guess the rest, right?」

Professor Rikka said vaguely, and Sapuna nodded with a complicated face… There was no need to ask anything more.

Her research was prohibited in Japan, so she used the AE series to continue development in Asia. She did her best to transport the scanning device out under the noses of the government and hid them in a factory in India. She was probably planning to conduct research in secret in the future. There was no schematics, and many spare parts could not be produced outside Japan. The process definitely violated several laws— but the result was, the unmanned factory was the sturdiest vault, and the inventions placed inside were not destroyed by the Great Fall.

「However, the top management's worries are unfounded. In the end, this is no more than the preservation of personality. To recreate it, we would need to breakthrough by two or three more levels— and the probability of the theory getting stuck behind a wall is much higher.」

I want to verify it
— Professor Rikka muttered in a lonely tone. Sapuna couldn't say anything… The scanner was still under development. And with the Scientific civilization heading towards its demise,there was no way she could continue with her research again.

「Anyway, let's spread the scanners here to the factory all over the continent, so we can preserve the personality of the heroes in the future. Specifically speaking, they just need to stay around ten minutes at a specific place near the factory. By the way, it can scan a corpse too. But it must be fresh enough without damage to the brain.」

Professor Rikka only showed an expression of pity for a moment before turning to her assistant with her usual expression. The lights in her eyes didn't change even after the Great Fall.

「In any case, we need to transport and install these devices in the other factories. We need to make a plan to minimize the effect of the Bertram waves during transport.

So— do your best, Sapuna!」

Professor Rikka declared with an innocent smile. Sapuna swallowed her complaints that almost spilled out, and nodded with a sigh. She then thought that she would be toyed around by that person until the very end.

In order to save even just one more person, the two of them travelled around the continent— A few years later.

Sapuna who had grown frail couldn't walk outside, and when Professor Rikka was nursing her, they received another grave news.

「... I'm sorry, Professor Rikka. We can't let you stay in the dorms anymore.」

The man who informed them was the biggest political supporter of Professor Rikka and other Scientists at the time. They received the news from the person who had supported and cheered them on all this while, ending their time here.

「My term in the parliament will be over by the end of the month. Most of the seats were taken by return to nature ideologists… I'm sorry that I couldn't stop their encroachment.」

The man clenched his fists with his head hung low. Professor Rikka wiped Sapuna's forehead with a wet towel and shook her head with a smile.

「You worked hard to protect us all this while. I'm grateful for all that you have done, and have nothing to be dissatisfied of.」

They already knew that this day would come. Their battle from the start had always been about how much they could do before that day comes. And now, Professor Rikka has no regrets. The man grit his teeth vexingly.

「... Treating our benefactor, the inventor of the AE series like a witch and exiling her. They don't understand their own foolishness and how shameless they are.」

They were treated like heroes in the past, but their treatment deteriorated greatly with the advent of anti-Science sentiments. Even their room in the government's dorm was taken away now. The people didn't want scientists to take part in governance now.

「Without a place of residence, what are your plans for now? If you don't have anywhere to go, please stay in my home. I still have rooms, a gentle wife and my sister, so it should be a cosy place. With enough rest, her body will...」

The man proposed in order to redeem himself. However, Professor Rikka shook her head quietly.

「Thank you for your offer, but we can't impose on you and worsen your standings.」

「...! Then where will you go? Your faces are well known, and there will be danger if you go outside.」

The man asked with a worried face, and Professor Rikka showed a mischievous smile.

「I have something to ask regarding that— can you prepare a sturdy car with a full tank of gas?」

Many people felt it was a pity that they were leaving. The policy of the government might not be aligned with how the masses feel, and many people respect the two women who did their best for mankind. It was the same at the places they passed through— the citizens volunteered to protect them, and they continued driving towards their destination.

「It's been so long since I travelled outside of work. I think the last time I went on a road trip was during college. I can still remember as if it was yesterday. It was so rowdy back then～」

The two of them played music loudly without a care for the world, and looked at the scenery rolling by them. To lessen the burden on her body, Sapuna lowered the passenger seat with her Water Sprite partner in her arms.

「... Professor… No, senior is the rowdiest one… Be it on the road or at the destination...」

She said sarcastically in a weak voice. Professor Rikka nodded and push down on the pedal

「And in contrast, you were so quiet. It can't be helped since you just came to study from abroad.」

「... Normally, people won't approach the quiet and gloomy exchange student… But you...」

「It’s your fault for being in my group for your first report. You got careless for answering the AI related questions I asked. And worst of all, you got careless and became my friend.」

Recalling their student days, Professor Rikka laughed while Sapuna pouted bashfully.

「I can still remember. When we first spoke, your opinion was really viscous. 『Giving AI a personality is the worst. The good point about AI is the elimination of such unnecessary things』 — Well, did I get any word wrong.」

「... You still won’t let that go...… Back then, I hated socializing. I can forget all that when I use machines, and that was the oasis for my soul… But you intentionally drag in the chains of human interactions...…」

They had opposing views when they first met. Thinking back about the intense debate they had, Professor Rikka said softly.

「It’s my goal to create an AI where you can feel love when you spend time with it.」

「... Yes, I know.」

「Hmm. Love— unlike things with fixed demand, this is one of the things society can’t produce a steady supply of. What is it? How do we produce it? Is it only available to people with good social relations? Just like the philosophers of the past, I have been thinking about the topics related to this.

Humans won’t feel love if they are served by machines. They need to acknowledge that the other party also has a 『heart』 in order to acknowledge this love. The other party is looking at me and loves me— if an AI doesn't have the communication abilities to make

people feel this way, it can't be a human's partner in the truest sense. That's the personality I want to create.」

Sapuna nodded. Because this thinking served as the foundation, the development of AI and the human psyche digitization was one and the same goal for her. Making AI closer to the psyche of humans, and reinterpreting them from the perspective of an AI— the border between those two was breaking down, and would merge in the future.

Sapuna exhaled and hugged her Water Sprite tightly.

「... Then, the love of these children is also your love, huh...」

「Hmm?」

「It's the love of humanity from the Professor itself… From the very beginning, you loved the human race itself instead of any specific person. But your love is too grand, and it couldn't be shown with just your own body. That's why you studied AI, right? In order to spread your love to more people...」

Sapuna touched her Sprite's cheeks lovingly. She was one of the humans attracted to this love.

「From now on, mankind will experience a long period of hardship. However— as long as the AE series is here, the world will be filled with your love. I think it's such an extravagant thing.」

Sapuna said with certainty. Professor Rikka smiled awkwardly as she listened— after a long silence, she said softly.

「... May the wind-up spring turn. That's what I think.」

「...?」

「Human civilization will stop for a time. Just like a music box that had exhausted all its energy. If we want to start the music box again, we need to wind it up. We need to spend a longer time winding it up then the time the music will play.」

She said as she glanced at Sapuna's partner.

「It will take a lot of tenacity. However… The Sprites won't give up. They will never tire, and turn the wind-up key on our backs with unwavering love, until the day when people will play the beautiful notes again.」

In place of me, a mortal
— Professor Rikka concluded in her heart. Sapuna showed a gentle smile.

「The robot turning the wind-up key of humanity?... Fufufu, how the tables have turned.」

「It's fine, they are robots and Sprites at the same time. There are cobbler Sprites, so it's fine to have wind-up key turning Sprites too, right?」

Professor Rikka joked as she pushed on the pedal— the two of them headed straight down the road.

「— We are here~, Sapuna. This is our last home.」

They left India, went around the Himalayans, and reached a place after traveling for several weeks. This was built in secret by their colleagues, a Storage Vault of human knowledge deep underground— an evacuation facility to pass down civilization to the distant future.

「Ohh! I was wondering how it will turn out, the work seems pretty well done. Here, this chair is really comfortable and can recline. Sit here while I tidy up the bed.」

After exiting the elevator and entering the living room, Professor Rikka helped her assistant sit down excitedly. The long journey had exhausted her frail body.

「We got enough supplies to last us for the rest of our lives. After we recover from the fatigue of our journey, we will have a party. Look, there's even your favourite beer.」

「... I'm looking forward to it...」

Professor Rikka took out the preserved food one after another, and Sapuna answered with a smile. Professor Rikka's condition was bad too, but she didn't show it and acted cheerfully. She helped her weak assistant to the showers and carefully wash away the filth accumulated during the journey. They then returned to the living room.

「A hot bath after such a long time feels so refreshing. Civilization is wonderful, although it's slowly breaking down. Here, lie on this comfortable bed.」

「... Okay...」

Sapuna laid on the clean sheets as she was told. Professor Rikka sat beside the bed and held her hand until her breathing steadied.

「You have calmed down… Why don't we chat before sleeping?」

「...? … Chat...?」

Sapuna looked at her in a daze. Professor Rikka brought something before her with both hands.

「I want to propose to you.」

She then opened a small box. A pair of similarly designed rings— the light from silver and beryl sparkled in the box.

「Sigh, it's a pain to source for gems. But after some hard work, I prepared something satisfactory. This style suits both you and me, right?」

Professor Rikka said as she put one ring on her right hand. Sapuna stared at her face in surprise.

「... When did you...」

「Hmm?」

「...… When did you realize… Realized that I'm a lesbian...」

Professor Rikka looked at her eyes that were wavering from worry.

「I hope you can believe me, this isn't important to me. It's just that after I realize your feelings, the problem is that I have nothing to repay you with.」

「......」

「Just like what you pointed out during our journey, I'm not fixated on any one person. I have had intimate relations with others in the past, but I broke off the relationship when I realized this side of me. Compared to my goals and ideals, I can't prioritize my love for them. The person you love placing you below second place— that must be a tragedy for many people, right?」

Professor said with a lonely smile, then looked at Sapuna's face again.

「And so, I think I can only love someone and treat them as the most important person, after I have done everything… However, I'm resigned to the fact that such a moment will never come. Because I'm a Scientist. As long as people want to develop technology, I will want to answer the call. You call my feelings the love for humanity— but maybe it's no different from an one-sided love that will never bear fruit.」

She sighed. The days she spent charging ahead by feeding off the smiles of the people flashed across Professor Rikka's mind.

「But those days are over. The AE series has taken root amongst the people on a scale that will give us hope. I did everything possible as a Scientist, and they don't want me to meddle anymore. I might be shameless, but I can't force my love on people who don't need me.」

She shrugged, which made Sapuna's chest tighten in pain. Professor Rikka continued with a serious expression.

「Do you understand? Right now, I'm liberated from the obligations and ideals of a Scientist for the first time. As a human, I'm ready to answer the feelings of someone who has always loved me. And now— it's only up to you whether you will accept my marriage proposal.」

Professor Rikka held a ring with both hands and waited for an answer. After a long struggle, Sapuna carefully reached out her left hand— the Professor gently placed it on her ring finger.

「... How strange, Professor...」

Sapuna said with a trembling voice as she stared at her left hand wearing a proof of love. Professor Rikka asked with a smile.

「Why? It suits you.」

「No, it's strange… This era is filled with hardship. Many people died, habitable places and food supply are dwindling. If this goes on, maybe humanity might go extinct.

But, in a world like this— Why am I so happy?」

Tears fell from Sapuna's eyes. Professor Rikka embraced her as if she was holding everything, then said with an incredibly gentle voice.

「Even if the world ends tomorrow, that won't stop humans in pursuing happiness.」

She tightened her embrace… Sapuna's skinny body was proof that she had accompanied Rikka's recklessness all this while.

「Have I conveyed it to you? Right now, I love you more than anything else in the world.」

Professor Rikka shared her true feelings. Sapuna moaned— in this quiet place free from persecution from anyone, the two of them kept embracing each other.

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「... This is where they passed away, right?」

When the video in the AR glasses ended, Ikuta looked around him and muttered. Kusu nodded and said.

「After they passed away, we, the AE series, continued living above ground with the people. After that— centuries after the population slowly decreased, they formed a religion.」

With that as a preface, stars filled the vision of Ikuta's group.

「Around 5,000 years— that's the time needed for the Bertram device submerged in the ocean to fully stop operation. However,

some people derived special meaning from this number. According to the estimations by astrologists, this coincides with the time for the North star to switch three times. Starting with Polaris, the next is Errai, then Alfirk, and then Alderamin— They treat this change as the time needed to sooth God's wrath. 5,000 years was too long, and it would be difficult to bear without attributing some meaning to it. The chaos caused by the Bertram device disrupted the magnetic field, so people had to navigate by the stars, which deify the North Star.」

The AR glasses displayed the masses looking up at the stars in prayer. It was a scene from the distant past, but their method of worship was very familiar to Ikuta and the others.

「The religion that was developed is the precursor to the current Church of Aldera. Because of the prevalent anti-Science thinking when it was formed, its teachings leaned towards conservatism and return to nature. A reaction towards the failure that caused the Great Fall, and a bitter excuse for the people to convince themselves that a scientific civilization would be in the far future. Instead of being envious of the era of prosperity that would never return, it was easier to motivate the people by treating Science as useless. That's how the people thought back then.」

When he heard the whole story, Anarai muttered with a sigh:

「... The grapes must be sour since it is out of reach, huh?」

「That's correct. The religious idea of punishing humans who violate God's taboo had always existed. And the people back then can accept that easily. However— at some point, people started seeing contradictions.」

「*Syah*
*... It's your existence, right?」

「Indeed. We, the AE series, are obviously a product of Science, but when the anti-Science started gaining momentum, the people didn't abandon us. More accurately speaking, they can't do that if they want to live— Anyway, this fact clashes directly with the ideals of anti-Science. And so, they branded us as a creation of God instead of man— literally calling us 『Sprites』.」

Kusu said. That was the self deceit the people pursued back then.

「In the beginning, it is just an excuse everyone doubted. But with the decline of the Scientific civilization with each passing generation, this idea felt more real. According to the teachings of the anti-Science ideals, most Science related technologies aside from a selected few were sealed. Less and less people understood the structure of the AE series. The people's wishes to shake off the shadow of Scientific civilization pushed this idea through. Obeying the teachings of their religion, they taught their children that the Sprites were sent by God to earth, and the children grew up thinking this was a fact. And so, the AE series was assimilated into the Church of Aldera.」

A religion based on Science and denying Science. Ikuta and Jean's faces stiffened when they learned this twisted truth.

「The group known as Scientist died out in the process. Because the world can't permit someone who might reveal the truth behind the Sprites. I think you already realized. This is the reason why the Church of Aldera is persecuting you, Professor Anarai Khan.」

The old sage who was called by name removed his AR glasses and looked to his side.

「I see— I understand now. The feud between the Scientists and the Church of Aldera can be traced back 5,000 years. Isn't that right, Pope?」

「......」

The Pope was silent. Kusu looked at her.

「We will convey the truth to each new leader of the Church… You must have gone through a lot of internal struggle, Pope Labutesuma.」

The shoulders of the Church of Aldera's leader shuddered. After a short pause, she slowly said:

「... When I rose to the top of the church, I learned that the religious teachings were false. My life as a priest ended on that day.」

Jean gasped when he saw the self mocking expression on the face of the Pope he had been acquainted with for so long.

「Intelligence is a sin of man, and being overly intelligent will invite calamity— That's what the Church of Aldera taught us. But what about the Four Great Sprites? They are clearly the product of humanity's wisdom, and supported mankind through these 5,000 years. If the scriptures tell us they are God's love— then why insist the Science that created them is evil?」

After learning the truth, she could no longer remain a devout believer. Ikuta realized that she had lived with doubts that she couldn't share with other followers from the Church of Aldera.

「On the other hand, the Church of Aldera's ideology also contributed to the survival of mankind from the brink… To stop a catastrophe like the Great Fall from happening again, I think sealing the development of Science is correct. Even if we have to give up on our past prosperity.」

Anarai didn't interrupt and listened to her monologue. The Pope continued plainly:

「However, I think that effort is reaching its limits. With the world slowly being freed from the effect of the Great Fall, even the power of the Church can't cut off the seedlings of Science that develop naturally in the masses. And finally, Anarai Khan— a huge flower like you bloomed… This made me realize. The stagnant civilization of mankind will start striding forward once again.」

Pope Labutesuma sighed deeply. Compared to previous Popes, she ascended at a special time. The archaic theories were buried while new values were rising— this was a historical moment.

「What changed my perspective on the big picture, was the decline of the Empire from corruption and the rise of the new Kioka Republic that promotes prosperity through technology… Ever since Kioka was founded, it had been seeking a path of development while maintaining peace with the ideology of the Church of Aldera. As I watch Kioka's progress beside the faltering Empire, I can see clearly that the future belongs to them—」

The moment she admitted that fact, no one here or anywhere else could know how she felt. With a sadness she couldn't' share with anyone in her heart, the Pope continued:

「There is an option of working with the Empire and attacking Kioka… But I think that will only result in unhappiness. No matter what happens to Kioka after the war, it is clear that the Empire is heading towards its demise. Entrusting humanity's future to a tree that might collapse at any time just to maintain the anti-Science values. I don't think that is the right choice.」

She paused here and looked towards the old sage.

「And so, Anarai Khan. My plan is for you to quickly discard the Empire and turn to Kioka. To do this, I tried to make it impossible for

you to stay in the Empire… But contrary to my expectations, you hung on to the Empire for a long time.」

「...Oh. So when you branded me a Heretic and sent the inquisition after me, you are not trying to capture and execute me?」

「If they can arrest you, I plan to hand you over to Kioka on the pretense of exiling you… But you found Bada Sankrei to be your backer, so it was hard to do so. Even with the authority of the church, we couldn’t oppose the military inside the Empire.」

The Pope said irately with downcast eyes.

「Be it in the past or the present, I can’t speak what I truly feel— Whenever I hear news about you, I can't help feeling envious... Why aren’t you imprisoned? In this world where we are beholden to — why are you the only one who can live so freely?」

Her voice was getting heated. Her long years of self restraint was cracking, showing her turbulent emotions below.

「I don’t have any freedom. Bonded by God, the nation and the responsibility for mankind's future— I need to think twice just to timidly take a single step. Despite that, I still have to fear making any mistakes— but why you, why only you...!」

Her fists on her knees were shivering. Seeing her like this, Anarai realized the true face of the person hostile towards him.

「... I see. So you are someone shouldering an overly heavy burden alone too?」

The old sage’s hostility towards her lightened. On the other hand— Ikuta glanced at the two elders who led different lives, and said.

「Kusu, I want to ask a few things— the mutation stimulant in the video, is it affecting us too?」

「Yes. Genes— that is an unknown concept to you. Please think of it as a blueprint of your body. The stimulant will affect the genes, and bring about a permanent change to the body of your descendants.」

The AR glasses display the brief points as Kusu explained. Ikuta stared hard at the unknown data.

「There are many types of mutations, and in order to adapt to harsh environments, there are many differences with the people of the past too. For example, the shortening of the pregnancy period— the women of the past have three times longer pregnancies before giving birth. However, the unstable environment after the Great Fall increased the risk of the long pregnancy period, so it had been changed drastically. To lessen the sharp decline in population, it was necessary to lighten the burden on the mothers too.」

Jean was surprised. To think the past civilization interfered with the human body to such an extent.

「This also affects the social structure too. Which means— be it the Empire or Kioka, women play a big role in society. One reason is the teachings of the Church of Aldera encourages this, another is the shortened pregnancy period allows women to have more active time. Furthermore, the idea of gender roles isn't strong. That is obvious since 30% of both armies are women. Matriarch groups that can be seen every now and then, such as the Shinnack Tribe.」

「You mean it's different in the past?」

「Yes. In past history, women officially joined the workforce only when the civilization became highly advanced. Before that, the role of the women were mainly to raise the children and protect the

home, while the men would take on the role of breadwinner. However— the Scientists who develop the mutation stimulant probably refuse to let the ethics and values regress back to that era. Other than the change in pregnancy period, they also made many adjustments, so the status between the genders wouldn't change too much even if they regress to the middle ages.」

Kusu said— this was the last resistance by the Scientists. They knew modifying the body of the human race violates ethics, but they still want to stop the values of the masses from regressing alongside civilization. Ikuta groaned. Violating ethics to protect ethics— Who could judge if this was just?

「On the contrary, there were people who wanted to revive old values with the regression of civilization, but with the establishment of the Church of Aldera, they were discarded. One reason was the AE series refusing to support people who promote such values. Because one of our design mottoes is the coexistence and prosperity of mankind, and will limit the functions for those with extremist views, and at times, even refuse to form contracts with them. Like we explained, we were gradually viewed as messengers of god instead of robots— and the masses interpret our actions as the will of god.
」

How ironic
, Ikuta thought. They were incorporated into a religion as the messenger of god, which strengthened the status of the AE series firmly.

「However— our standards for ethics will be updated from time to time. Because the values at the time of our creation cannot be directly imposed onto you. Coexistence and prosperity is our motto, but we can't stop multiple countries forming when the population recovers. And so, we have to figure out the best way to interact with

the citizens within each nation. That includes how we are used during wars.」

Kusu said— They made countless attempts to cooperate with the future generations, and ended up like this. After seeing Ikuta nodding from the corner of his eyes, Jean asked.

「... What about the places where the Sprites didn't spread to? From what we saw in the video, there are many people like that all over the world, right?」

「The regions not supported by the AE series have shown no signs of any surviving civilization. There was contact with the United Nations and other far away countries for some time after the Great Fall, but it has stopped for a very long time. After moving to the underground city vaults, they must have adopted their own survival strategy, and there is a non zero chance that they have persevered somewhere. But after losing contact for so long, it's more likely for the former to be true.」

The merciless answer made Jean bit his lips. Accepting all the explanations given so far, Anarai nodded firmly.

「I see, I understand your history now. So, what's the point of this 『Trial of God』?」

He then cut right into the heart of the issue. Kusu answered immediately.

「Before answering this question, I want to make this clear to everyone that this is an abnormal situation.」

「—Oh?」

「The original plan is for the preserved information to be made public when the 『Storage Vault』 is opened. I already shared a part

of it, but the main points are the Science technology and knowledge— detailed information that will seriously affect your civilization.

I will start with the conclusion. I can't tell you at this stage.」

Tension was in the air. The old sage stroke his chin and asked:

「Hmm… Is the test results not good?」

「No, you have adequately proved that you have reached the standard level. The problem is the current situation of your civilization.」

Kusu paused and then said.

「『The condition for publicizing the information is, the participating group of non-hostile nations must prove that they have reached the standard level of intelligence.」

「「—!」」

Ikuta and Jean both turned tense. It knew that they understood, but Kusu still explained in details:

「The last half is fine, but the issue is the first half— the Empire and Kioka are in a state of war. As you all know, giving new technology to two nations at war will intensify the conflict both directly and indirectly. It will likely cause the mutual destruction of both countries. So this isn't a suitable time to make the technology public.

And of course, this is partly our mistake too. Nations at war are cooperating in these investigations, that is unexpected for us. We can just not answer— but since this is a good chance to convey the truth, we issued a trial to everyone. However, publicizing the advanced technology is a different matter.」

Kusu stopped at this point and turned to Anarai.

「Furthermore— another reason is that we can't ignore the diplomatic attitude that Kioka is adopting towards Ra Saia Alderamin. We know you didn't really destroy the wall of the Cathedral— but to the people who didn't know the truth, it was a clear act of provocation. Instead of allowing meaningless confusion, we decided that revealing the truth at this juncture will be better.」

「Oh, so the cat's out of the bag?」

「Correct. It's impossible for you to destroy that wall with your current technology— After the Great Fall, when there were still weapons from the past civilization around, the Cathedral was attacked several times. So we considered the possibility of the debris on the outer wall could be dug out. We didn't expect Kioka would use this diplomatically though.」

This was the truth behind the scam ran by Kioka and the Scientists. After learning that their trick was seen through right from the start, Anarai crossed his arms and groaned… It improved efficiency as a result, but that was only the kindness of the Sprites. It was debatable whether this was a good scheme.

After glancing at the old sage in deep thought, Jean confirmed with the Sprite again.

「... And so, no matter what form it takes, you won't make the information public if the war doesn't ends?」

「Correct. And also, it has to be a permanent end of the war, not a temporary ceasefire.」

Kusu announced clearly. When he heard that, Ikuta stretched his back and said to Jean:

「That’s how it is— want to stop the war?」

「Impossible.」

The white-haired officer’s answer was immediate. He didn’t even think before answering.

「For Kioka who holds the upper hand strategically, there is nothing to gain from peace talks. There is even the risk of the power balance tilting because of the outflow of technology. There is no ground for negotiation at all.」

「... Sigh, I thought as much.」

Ikuta accepted this without any question. He turned his gaze back on Kusu.

「Anyway, you are not asking us to stop fighting wars right, Kusu?」

「...... Yes, Ikuta. We understand that this isn’t a realistic proposal.」

Kusu said with a nod. Without waiting for it to finish, Ikuta stated the conclusion.

「To fulfil that condition, there is only one thing we have to do— finish the war quickly.」

Jean and the Pope both showed bitter faces. Kusu hung its head apologetically. When he saw this, Ikuta smiled awkwardly.

「Don’t make such a face, Kusu… I know you have no intention of inciting a war. You are urging us to act rationally after the war, correct?」

There was no doubt that the nature of the Sprites was to help people. However, with the complicated relationship in human

society, their actions were no longer simple. Ikuta explained their intent on their behalf.

「Be it win or lose, the new technology will only be made public after the war. This means— depriving the benefits that both countries will gain by prolonging the war. Since a peace treaty was one condition for making the technology public, the losing side will still have the grounds for negotiation. 『We won't fight to the last and surrender, but in return, you have to accept some conditions regarding our treatment after the war』 — something like that.」

「*...Yah**

. And the technology will probably be released in stages. They will probably give the same condition for each release, which will defeat the benefits of restarting a war.」

Jean said, as he tried to make sense of what the Sprites were trying to do. Kusu nodded at the two of them.

「It is as you say. It doesn't matter if the Empire or Kioka won, we will support a peaceful development built on top of that country's governance. The only thing we want is to minimize sacrifices during the process of reaching that goal.」

At this point of the discussion, the white-haired officer stood up, looked at the other three people, and asked in a stiff voice.

「... For the discussion about that, can we do so separately?」

「Yes, I was planning to do that. Jean Arkinex— please turn left at the first junction after exiting the room. At the end of the passageway is another large reception machine. You can activate it by putting your partner's Soul Stone in. It will tell you the rest.」

「*Yah**
, I understand.」

After getting permission, Jean turned and headed to the designated place. When he left the room, it was Kusu's turn to act.

「Ikuta, please follow me with your AR glasses. We will also go into another room. Professor Anarai and Pope Labutesuma, if you wish, I can bring you into individual rooms—」

Kusu asked them out of consideration. However, the Pope didn't say anything and Anarai shook his head.

「No, this place will be fine… There won't be many chances to have a good talk after this. So let me chat with my long time enemy.」

Anarai seemed to be treating this as a chance to make up with his enemy. It was just like him to not be affected by negative feelings— Ikuta thought with a smile.

「I understand. Well then, let's go, Ikuta.」

Kusu led the way with huge strides. However, the youth following him was anything but calm.

「— Aside from the thing about the technology being made public, there's something that is bothering me.」

Ikuta asked after being brought into a room and the door closed. There was a hint of anxiety that wasn't like him, and Kusu asked with its usual calm.

「Yes, Ikuta. Please go ahead.」

With its permission, the youth suddenly became hesitant to speak. Realizing he was too anxious— he organized his thoughts and said slowly.

「... It's a long time ago, when the military coup was ending.」

He said as he recalled the most painful memory in his life.

「After she died, I lost my ability to command. The exhaustion and injury were part of the reason, but to be honest, there are still parts of my memories that are blurred… but even under such a situation, I still remembered what I did.

First, we put her body inside a coffin filled with ice. We then left the rocky terrain with the other serious casualties. We took the carriage to the nearest 『Cathedral』. Because most of them had medical facilities, they were included in the return route right from the start— when we reached there, we brought Yatori's body to the building beside the Cathedral… That's right, we brought it there. The burial was conducted in the Cathedral, which is the procedure for the passing of high ranking officers— however...」

Ikuta recalled, then asked Kusu:

「Our actions were directed by you and Shia. Am I right, Kusu?」

「... Yes, that's right, Ikuta.」

Kusu looked at the youth and affirmed his doubts. Ikuta could feel his voice trembling as he continued:

「After confirming that, I want to ask about that video earlier— digitization of the human psyche. The reconstruction of the soul through Science. Professor Rikka mentioned these terms, what do they mean?」

Ikuta stopped at this point— he was being too indirect. His style of starting a topic from outside and his glib of the tongue was unbearable to him right now.

「No, I won’t mince my words at this point. I want you to tell me just one thing— Is she here?」

There were no frills, he only asked with his trembling lips for a Yes or a No.

「... In a sense, no, in a very limited sense, you can say that.」

Kusu answered after careful thought. He looked the youth right in the eye before continuing:

「She— Yatorishino Igsem’s personality data, and the genetic information from her body had been preserved here— furthermore, your data is here too. This is a parallel mission we are conducting alongside with helping humanity, a part of recording the history of mankind for the future— that’s right, it’s just a record.」

Kusu said without any emotions, which made Ikuta grit his teeth. That’s right— they said the same thing in the video.

「The reconstruction of personality mentioned by Professor Rikka, was just a theory at that time. And it assumed great advancement in the medical and other fields too. Preserving the state of the brain as data, and using it as a blueprint to remake the body and personality when the person was still alive— It’s just a theory based on assumed technology. No, it’s just a dream.」

「... Go on.」

「Yes. As for the reasons, firstly— the precision and accuracy of the scanners made by Professor Rikka based on her theory of human psyche digitization couldn’t be verified. Her idea was at the forefront of that era, so no one could tell if her theory was right. The personality data preserved here are just strings of numbers, can it really be called a soul? —There is no solid proof. I can only call it a compilation of detailed data on someone’s personality.」

Ikuta stood still with his fists clenched, as he listened to everything his partner said. The faint hope the youth was holding on to had been dashed.

「Second, the advancement in the medical field was just a prediction back then. Cloning a person from its genes was already possible during the 21st century. However, the recreation of personality— there are no examples of a state of the brain being recreated. Research on the function of the brain was still the greatest problem in the medical field. And so, even if Professor Rikka's theory is proven to be correct, there are still a lot of problems involving many different realms before we talk about resurrection.」

Kusu explained his reasons. The youth couldn't even express any doubts. That was something Professor Rikka admitted herself in the video.

「Third point— in a sense, this is the most practical problem. In order to test out the feasibility of everything mentioned earlier, the standard of civilization needs to be higher than before the 『Great Fall』. I think you know what that means, Ikuta.」

When he heard that, Ikuta stared at the ceiling from an unbearable suffocating feeling. He knew what Kusu wanted to say, and said it with the pain of pushing a thorn into his chest.

「... Who knows how many millennials that will take?」

「Correct. Furthermore, there's no way of telling if civilization can rise to the same standard… The knowledge and skills are left behind, but the past civilization used a lot of resources, so there are less ores that can be mined. And so, you all will have to develop in a different way than the past. Instead of the explosive advancement after the industrial revolution, it might be a slow advance.」

Ikuta was silent… Kusu didn't need to tell him, Ikuta already knew. The civilization he saw in the video was leaps and bounds more advanced. With time, they would reach that level one day— the gulf was unbelievably big.

「Aside from that, there are also many problems in philosophy and ethics. In summary, the resurrection of Yatorishino Igsem is in the realm of science fiction at this stage.」

Kusu concluded, dealing a final blow to the youth's expectations. However, Ikuta's shoulders shuddered for an instant.

「—?」

The strange term he heard at the end intrigued him. He repeated it to himself.

「... You used an interesting term just now. Science Fiction? What's that?」

「That was a genre of literature in the old civilization. Unrealized technology, a future world where the technology is possible, or an unknown civilization from a different planet— they find joy in imagining such contents. Can you understand what I mean?」

「So there are things like that. Isn't that fairy tales for kids?」

「There are many works written for children, but Science Fiction fans are mostly adults, since many works require the knowledge of a Scientist to be comprehended. Many authors are Scientists themselves— many works also wrote about technology that has a high chance of being realized, and described what will happen with its implementation. These are treated as hints towards the future.」

This explanation made Ikuta's heart thump. Things that had not been realized yet, a hint of a future by turning a technology into reality—

in the distant past, even the Scientists would enjoy such works, and would imagine and write about it themselves.

「... I see. Then— that is...」

The moment he learned this fact, the youth's mouth curled into a smile. It had been a long time since he felt a change in his perspective. His sullen soul wavered at this idea he learned for the first time.

「— The Scientists' dream.」

Ikuta said quietly— the people from the distant past told him so, and he was permitted to do so.

His father used to say— Every child has the right to dream. Would that right slowly disappear when they become adults? No, that wasn't true— it would just become difficult. The adults who had seen the harshness of reality would dismiss their dreams.

Hence, adults need bigger dreams… Religion was one example. Faith was a type of dream where you strengthen your power through sharing with others. A devout follower would dream about the afterworld until the moment they die.

However, that wasn't true for him.

He couldn't believe in the salvation from god, or in a world after death. Ever since his parents died, he was sure that god didn't exist, and that was how he lived.

「... Ahh, but—」

But even someone like him could dream about the distant future. If it was a world supported by technology far more advanced than now, and the many people living there… People would definitely laugh at him, questioning what was the difference from dreaming about the

world after death? However, it was a big difference for Ikuta. He believed in Science. So he had hope for the advent of Science. Just like the people who believe in God, who believed in the salvation God promised after they die.

「——」

The youth closed his eyes and imagined the distant future. Human civilization had surpassed the past civilization, a world where war is ancient history. He imagined a red haired girl was reborn as a human. The crimson gate that bonded her life was gone, and she could go anywhere she wished. She could live as she wished in that vast world.

She might just be someone who resembled a certain vermillion-haired girl. If the preservation of her soul wasn't perfect, the one born might be a different person with similar features. According to Kusu, that possibility was much higher. There was a greater possibility that civilization wouldn't develop until that level.

But that was enough,
Ikuta thought. That person's life would definitely be connected to that vermillion-haired girl. A person who originated from her, would live a life she didn't have the chance of experiencing— as long as the chance wasn't zero, he was satisfied dreaming and hoping about this distant future.

He could feel his body suddenly becoming lighter. Ikuta closed his eyes slowly and asked:

「... Can I see the preserved data of Yatori?」

「Yes, you can see it for reference. Please put on the AR glasses.」

He put on the AR glasses on Kusu's urging. A lot of information flashed before his eyes.

「We can't process the data on her personality right now, but you can browse through her history that has been recorded. It includes the images recorded through our eyes. Do you want to see it?」

「Yes, please.」

Kusu displayed the image on his request. The next moment— a virtual screen appeared before the youth, showing her figure from the past.

『— That's enough, Ikuta. You can pick up girls next time.』

「... !...」

It was a video of a scene when they were taking a boat to the Officer Cadets Exam. The vermillion haired girl was speaking, moving, and emoting freely— Ikuta felt nostalgic at the sight of her.

Kusu said quietly as Ikuta watched without saying a word:

「Because of her early death, Yatorishino Igsem might not be remembered in the history books. However— from what we observed, very few people throughout history could match her overall capability. Her character was balanced excellently. If she was still alive, she would achieve many great things. Furthermore, she had a close relationship with you, who has left a mark in history— we conclude that she is a person that is worthy of being preserved in the records.」

It expressed its respect for her without any reservation. Ikuta stared at the image without even wanting to blink, and asked softly.

「... Is the personality of Professor Rikka and Ms Sapuna preserved inside?」

「... No, there are limited recorded data on them, and they didn't want their personality to take up space inside.」

「...Is that so… I thought that might be so.」

Ikuta mumbled, then caressed the image of her in the AR glasses.

「Thank you. Because of you— I got to dream about the far future.」

The youth offered his thanks to the two people who were no longer here. He was sincerely grateful to have come here.

「... See you later, Yatori.」

After saying that, Ikuta gestured at Kusu with his eyes, bidding farewell to the happy memories he wanted to see forever. He took off the AR glasses, then closed his eyes— a while later, he opened his eyes.

「— We got off topic. Let's get back on the main issue, Kusu.」

The youth got into the agenda with his usual tone. His voice wasn't trembling from emotions any more.

「I'm well aware. To reach the future and continue to dream— we have to survive.」

Ikuta faced his partner with clear determination. And so— he and Kusu started discussing the war that will happen in the near future.

After going back to the surface with the other three people, Ikuta gathered Chamille, Yorga and Vackie onto the large carriage, and shared most of the information he learned.

「... Is that all true?」

He didn't think Ikuta was lying, but the content was so shocking that Yorga couldn't help asking. Even speaking conservatively, what he heard was a truth that could overturn history. Ikuta nodded with a serious face.

「No matter what, we need to bring this truth back to the Empire to discuss. It's way too early to make this information public. At this point, it will just incite chaos amongst the masses.」

So you have to keep this a secret
, Ikuta said with a finger to his lips. The Empress knew that was to be expected, and crossed her arms in deep thought.

「... How will this affect our foreign affairs? Considering this truth, how will the actions of Kioka and Ra Saia Alderamin change in the future?」

「Ra Saia Alderamin probably wouldn't change too much, aside from insisting on their neutrality… Like I mentioned, the Sprites will only reveal lost technology after the state of war between the two nations stops. This means the winner of this war will be in a better position to adopt this unknown technology. Just like that Prime Minister, we can fully focus on the war now.」

The situation becoming clear was an advantage to both sides, but on the other hand, they have less options diplomatically. The truth they learned underground didn't give Kioka any reason to avoid war.

「And of course, both sides need time to prepare. We will be making specific changes, but our cooperative relationship will last for just 2 years at best. It's too early for both sides before that, and any later will waste the advantage they gained in the previous wars… Anyway, the Empire and Kioka are starting a countdown towards the final showdown. That is for certain.」

The youth said confidently. But when the three of them turned tense, he relaxed his shoulders and reverted to his usual casual tone.

「Leaving that aside for now— we got played like a damn fiddle from the unexpected situation, but the Three Nation Conference is a very important event. New things kept happening one after another, and I really enjoyed myself. How should we make full use of this new information— we need to think about this, there is no reason to feel depressed.」

He encouraged the three of them, but this was his sincere thoughts. Ikuta suddenly showed a lonely smile.

「The only regrettable thing is— our time as Scientists will be ending soon.」

They returned to the Diplomatic building in a far shorter time than their trip away. After spending a few more days discussing plans for the future, the turbulent Three Nation Conference finally ended. The two armies were ready to withdraw, and the Scientists from both camps gathered between the two campgrounds. They looked lonely, and only the old sage looked dissatisfied.

「What, the meeting is over!? We are just getting started! We confirmed the existence of a super ancient civilization, there are loads of things we Scientists have to consider!」

Ikuta, Yorga and Malvackie returning to the Empire infuriated Anarai. Nazuna standing beside the old sage soothed him:

「Professor, don't be too hard on them. Ikuta and Chamille-chan still have many things to do in the Empire. It's a pity, but they can't stay with us and play.」

「Why not? As long as we live, we have to play in our search for truth and fun, that's the right way for us Scientists to live! How can my disciple be so hesitant!?」

Anarai ignored his position and the other party's circumstances, and said angrily. He then took large strides towards Ikuta and whispered mischievously into his ear.

「... Hey～ Ikuta. How about coming over to Kioka? If you go back to the Empire, you will just prepare for a useless war, right? Isn't it stupid to waste your life on that? You can just bring Chamille, Yorga and Malvackie with you. Science will get more interesting from now on— since the unknown technology will be made public in the near future!」

Instead of being the temptation of the devil, this was closer to an invitation by a naughty kid. Ikuta laughed softly. Anarai was already thinking further ahead.

「No, you don't have to come to Kioka, we can relocate our base in the Empire instead. The church won't nag us if we go there, right? Aside from Kioka, our research will progress faster if we also get support from the Empire! That's even better!」

The old sage clapped his hands loudly. He was no longer whispering, so Bajin rushed over and pointed behind him.

「Wait, Professor...! That's definitely impossible! And they can hear you! The bureaucrats are listening with raised eyebrows...!」

「Who cares! With how things are, then stop the war! It's been a hundred years, haven't they had enough? It is nothing compared to the Scientific research that will be uncovered after 5,000 years! It's about time to see the right place to commit our efforts! If we get this right, humans can even aim to reach the stars!」

Instead of holding back, Anarai started lecturing the bureaucrats instead. Ikuta couldn't help laughing out loud.

「Hahaha...! … You never change, Professor Anarai. You… have stayed the same all this while.」

Ikuta kept smiling and gently wiped tears from the corners of his eyes. His eyes were filled with respect, admiration and envy. And then...

「Since the first day we met, I have always wanted to become an adult like you.」

In place of an answer, he stated his unrealized dream.

The Scientist detested by God and loved by freedom. Refusing to bow down to the conventions of society, a free spirit who pursued his goals wholeheartedly. He also had the courage and motivation to use the fruits of his research to improve the lives of the people… Deeply attracting many geniuses who lacked the freedom, that was who Anarai Khan was.

The youth dreamed in the past that he would be just like Anarai one day.

The youth now accepted the fact he could never become such a person.

「——」

That was why Ikuta's didn't look gloomy at all at this moment.

He held on tightly to his unrealized dream and walked forward. On a path different from his teacher— his will and the will of the vermillion-haired girl in his heart walked on together.

He was no longer a child, but an adult.

Hence, he expressed his gratitude as an adult.

「Thank you for staying the same, just like the person I admired when I was a child… From now on, please stay with your disciples and take care of yourself. May you stay free from any bonds and chains at all places and at all times.」

When the youth told him that.

Anarai could see a clear image of her smiling at his side.

「…… I see.……..」

The old sage realized that the person before him had already decided his way of life.

「……」

He had countless words to urge Ikuta to stay, and the feelings to say them filled up his chest.

However— Anarai swallowed down all that and smiled quietly.

「... Don't worry about me. As you can see, I'm in top condition, and don't plan to retire for at least 50 years.

So— you should take care of yourself〜Ikuta. Get along well with Chamille, and don't push yourself. If things are tough, rely more on Yorga and Malvackie.」

He then gave the last advice as a master to his disciple who would be forging his own path. Ikuta smiled with a nod when he heard that.

「Relax. Don't tell anyone, but I have many reliable companions who can help me slack off. It's really comfortable.」

The youth answered without pushing himself. Seeing him like this, Anarai narrowed his eyes.

「I see… then you must go back～... What a shame～」

He muttered regrettably, not concealing how he felt. The old sage spent some time composing himself, then turned to the youth with his usual smile.

「Ikuta Sankrei— my disciple, and the son of my irreplaceable friend. Meeting you and your father is one of the best things that happened to me… Thank you for studying by my side, and allowing me to find value in the things we see.」

Anarai said and opened his arms at Ikuta. Ikuta nodded, then embraced his teacher. The days they spent in the Rising Sun flashed across their minds… The bright, warm and happy memories. A brilliant time in their lives that they could never return to.

「Farewell, Ikuta— May your future be blessed by the Sprites.」

At this moment, the Scientist prayed to the Sprites created by the humans of old for the first time… A love that had not changed for 5,000 years. He wished that love could illuminate his disciple’s path until the very end.

— After they parted, the master and disciple never met again.



TL: So, people who knows astrology well already know

Credits

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